

Mongrels

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Mongrels

by [HassouToby](#)

Summary

Ring the bell. It's time to eat.

The Day of Depravity goes badly. The crime lord Melon's tenure as leader of the Shishigumi ends as he chokes on his own blood, and the lions douse their torch and leave in disgrace. But the black market's troubles don't end there. Over the following weeks, a series of bombings culminates in a massacre that leaves the market's four crime families in disarray. All evidence points to the Butchers, the enigmatic courier network behind the city's meat trade. But why would they attack the same animals they've quietly fed over the years? And what will the Four Families do if the market goes hungry?

Legosi is still living in the Hidden Condo, making his deliveries and hoping that the stain on his record will wash away. But when Louis calls to warn him away from the black market, the wolf unwittingly drags them both into the chaos brewing within the district. The Butchers sharpen their knives, the city trembles, and Legosi and Louis must take a stand against the violence erupting from their society's underworld, before it devours them and everything they cherish.

Spoilers up to Chapter 157.

Notes

The misfortune of others tastes like honey.
- Proverb

If you judge us, we're all damned.
- Franz Ferdinand, "The Fallen"

A Cold Wind Spoils the Candlelit Feast

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The moon was wrong tonight. Round and ripe, it hung too low in the sky and its silvery shine had gone yellow, mildewed, like something left to spoil. In the black market's empty thoroughfare, that rotted light made every bloodstain clear. The stalls were empty, the benches occupied only by the scents of those who'd dined there, but every surface still had those stains, like the lingering ghosts of those who'd gone under the butchers' knives. The market went empty like this every month but never got used to it. It sat and shivered in its loneliness.

Someone walked up the center of the road now, a slim horned silhouette with a jaunty step. He wore a surgical mask and an affable squint but his outline was still faintly malformed, parts joined together inexpertly, the seams visible if one knew how to look. But they seldom did, and that was why the crime lord Melon was in such a jolly mood tonight. Always beneath notice even with blood on his chin, he boogie-danced through the carcasses of the city's forgotten places, sating himself however he could.

He stopped by an abandoned stall with a wicked cleaver still jutting from its butcher's block. Delicately, he plucked off his mask, exposing his mutant jawline, that leopard's maw with its lolling tongue, and smelled deep. The wood was varnished with hare, antelope, rich red boar. His drool spotted the tabletop and he bent down and ran his tongue across its surface, smacked his lips.

Nothing but sand, he thought.

Wherever he went, Melon's preternaturally sharp hybrid senses screamed flavor into his mind, and whatever he tasted turned to grit in his mouth. But tonight, if he concentrated, he could almost imagine something else beneath that hateful taste. A hint of salt. Waves lapping at the beach of his tongue.

He replaced his mask and wrenched the cleaver off the block. He held it up to catch the light, admired his masked, innocent face. Humming, he set off towards the smell of blood on the wind.

For weeks now he'd been harassed out of one criminal enterprise after another, and it had started to get on his nerves. Yafya, that insufferable equine bore, had cut short his ivory trade, but he blamed someone else for the rest – his drug-dealing side hustle, his underground entertainment gig, his brief and thrillingly contentious stint as the Shishigumi's leader. A certain, gangling, breathtakingly stupid grey wolf had persistently nipped at his heels, trying to spoil his fun, and even after Melon had gut-shot the witless mutt, he'd shown up outside his window with a new coat of flour-white fur like some bizarre breed of moth. Melon had been hurled three stories down and pinned under the wolf's bulk, and for a second he'd actually believed that this blind and stumbling society had managed to bring him to justice. But he'd gotten away, and taught his pursuer a lesson in inter-species dynamics to boot. Pull

up the mask, narrow the eyes, and there we go – now Melon is the hapless victim again, tucking his bloodied hands behind his back while the police ran off after the would-be hero. He'd never felt more invincible. If it poured right now, he could walk between raindrops.

He tossed the cleaver, caught it, tested its edge. It was the Day of Depravity, where all good meat-loving souls watched blood spill. Appetites running thick and hot as fresh-boiled molasses. And back home, at the school where he taught, was a little white rabbit who, not days ago, had been the first animal to make his belly growl. The moonlight was dim and wet, but Melon's future was so bright that he could barely see.

You sick, sad town, show me every inch of you! Open wide and swallow me whole, the way I'd love to swallow you!

The black market was sometimes called the back-alley market, and it was a description at once geographic and existential. The main thoroughfare was the most-frequented, but the market was practically a city ward unto itself, a cramped and stinking labyrinth of flickering neon and moaning steam-grates, a gaudy sensuous assault that could provoke the most straight-laced carnivore to slobbering mania. It threaded all through the city, the meat trade reaching into everywhere good law-abiding animals died, spiriting their carcasses onto these stained and splintery tables. It *was* the back-alleys, the pulsing capillaries of the city, and tonight, the square that Melon now approached was its beating heart.

The Four Families had taken their positions, in preparation for their monthly turf war. Each of them had stakes in criminal enterprises across the city, and that included the black market, but only one of them could be recognized as its true owner, and the clout that carried was not to be underestimated. The meat trade was a never-ending buffet of wealth, and while the losers of this battle could jostle and scrounge and scheme for their own scraps of money and influence over the place, the lion's share of it would go to the winner, to whoever's bloody torch filled the most territory with its scent. And speaking of lion's share, his naughty underlings were all present and accounted for.

To the north, the Dokugumi fingered their vials of venom, their representative hiding his fangs behind a mask of his own. The Madaragumi gripped their blades to the west, many of them keeping a wary eye on their boss. But it was the Inarigumi's leader who strutted up to confront the Shishigumi directly – Renne the red fox, sinuous and single-eyed. Even at this distance, Melon could hear pick up her heartbeat, steady and low. She held her nerve as Dolph towered over her and stared her down. Of all the families, the Inarigumi knew the black market's inner workings best and had a reputation as sneaks and connivers, and it was no secret that Renne was angling to seize control of the market after the Shishigumi's recent change of fortune. Melon sauntered closer, hearing their voices on the blood-scented wind.

"Do you have something new to show us?" Renne asked. "After you started fraternizing with that little deer, you all became so *progressive*." She clucked her tongue. "I have to say, it was an interesting gamble, but an herbivore boss seems to have made the Shishigumi awfully soft."

Melon materialized behind Dolph like an evil spirit.

"Then how about a hybrid boss?" he asked brightly, and peeled off his mask.

He always took a quiet thrill in how animals reacted when seeing him fully – that momentary shudder, torn between their feelings towards carnivores and herbivores at once. He existed in the gaps between their instincts. In any other circumstance, this was when he'd sink in the blade. Instead, he stepped in front of Dolph – taking a moment to wink at Free, who just stood and glared, the torchlight dancing in his milky eye – and leaned in close to Renne. He could hear her pulse jump.

“So sorry for the belated introduction,” he said. “I’m Melon, the proud new leader of these lovely lions. It’s a pleasure!”

Renne wasn’t mollified. She stepped back, one hand going for her revolver.

“So you’re Melon,” she growled. “The Shishigumi really are doomed if they’d nominate a freak like this.”

“Doomed? Freak?! Don’t you slander us like that, little lady! I won’t abide that sort of talk about this family!” He brandished the cleaver menacingly at her, then lowered it. “That’s what I’d like to say, anyway, but we have rather brought this on ourselves. The smell of lion blood is terribly weak tonight.”

He sighed, and held up the blade. Dolph’s stony face glittered in its reflection.

“Ah, well. Easily fixed.”

He whipped around and the blade lashed out in a silver arc, and then Dolph was stumbling back, blood jetting in a rusty stream from his opened throat. The Shishigumi shouted his name and the other families watched on in shock as Dolph sat down hard, his hands cupped under the stream as though he could catch it and pour it back into himself, and then he tipped over into the growing pool and shuddered once and was still.

The market had gone deathly quiet, save for the Shishigumi’s cries. Onlookers from the streets and the high windows raptly watched the blood spread. Its iron perfume had become cloyingly thick, enough to set many of them drooling. Melon stood limp, then raised his head and sniffed deep.

“Ooh, that smell,” he said. “Can you smell that smell? The black market’s full to bursting with the stench of lion.” He grinned. “That means it belongs to the Shishigumi, doesn’t it?”

He leapt up onto a nearby dumpster with such liquid speed that Renne backed off, nearly tripping over her shoes. He tossed the cleaver to the ground and spread his arms wide, a gory preacher to the stunned multitude.

“Come on, everyone! Let’s *eat!*”

They looked at each other, then back to Melon. Old hungers stirred within them.

“This turf war is such a bore! This is the Day of Depravity! It’s for celebrating your love of meat, isn’t it? That’s why you’re all here, aren’t you?!” His manic cheer was contagious; the animals began to raise their voices in turn. “That’s right! Let me hear you shout it out! We’re

animals, after all. We're nothing without our appetites! Fill your bellies 'til they burst! *Die with your mouths full!*"

The black market echoed with beasts chanting the Shishigumi's name. Melon pumped his fist in time with their voices, blood dripping down his carnivore's muzzle. The other families were helpless in the face of this hysterical celebration; they slunk further into the side streets' darkness, all of them with weapons close to hand. Melon didn't even look at them. He was drunk on the mob's miasma. The stench of blood and the muzzles slick with drool and the thundering heartbeats all around, a haze of appetite like a fire beneath his pelt, his own blood burning, about to transfigure him into something altogether new.

Under the mob's cheer came a small *pop*, and Melon felt a puff of air on the side of his neck. The noise stopped, all at once. The crowd stared up at him, their smiles gone. Melon tilted his head, his own smile fading, and tried to ask them why they'd suddenly become so glum, but he couldn't seem to talk. It was suddenly very hard to breathe. The air couldn't get past this taste in the back of his throat.

This taste.

This taste?

He couldn't find the right words to describe it, didn't have them after a lifetime of every flavor crumbling to ash on his tongue. It was sugar and salt, honey and cream, thick and rich like velvet and with the sour tang of a dropped coin. He sank into it like a feather mattress and no matter much he swallowed there always seemed to be more. He put his fingers to his neck and they returned warm with flavor, and he shoved them between his teeth and sucked it away.

The animals below were still staring up at him, their confusion curdled to horror. He couldn't understand it. *Stop gawking and come up here, everyone! You have to try some of this!*

There were strange lights going off behind his eyes and his knees were going weak but he couldn't stop eating, every mouthful showing him new vistas of flavor and texture. He wasn't here anymore. He was in the cafeteria of the school where he taught, bent over that frail white rabbit and sinking his fangs into her neck. The soft meat yielding under him, bursting open warm and red and filling up to the brim with that taste. The taste!

He was falling now. Everything had gone very dark. He couldn't feel his hands or teeth or tongue, but even as his body and the world in which it dwelled faded from him, the taste remained.

Delicious.

* * *

Melon's head cracked on the pavement as he tumbled off the dumpster, blood still pulsing from the artery that the bullet had torn open. His mouth was lathered with blood and his fingers had been chewed down to the bone, teeth claggy with his own flesh. His slit feline

eyes were pinned open, staring at nothing, but even after they clouded over his throat still worked, swallowing.

Slowly, every head turned to the Shishigumi. All of them were still bent over Dolph's corpse, save one. Free stood with his pistol dangling from one hand. With the other, he produced a cigarette, lit it, dragged deep. He smoked and watched them all like someone in front of a firing squad. But no retribution came. The Families and the marketgoers had just watched the Shishigumi elevated to the very top of the city's criminal hierarchy, only to kill the one who'd put them there. The heresy of it all was so great that it had paralyzed them.

Wordlessly, Miguel rose with Dolph cradled in his arms. Free holstered his pistol and knocked over the Shishigumi's torch. It landed in the blood pool, sputtered, and died. He flicked his cigarette in after it and followed the rest of the lions, into the market's back alleys.

The others shuffled their feet, wouldn't look each other in the eye. The spell had broken and left them all with a feeling of shame nauseating as a hangover. Renne glanced at the Madaragumi, shook her head, and gestured for the other foxes to pick up their torch. The other families followed suit. The war had suddenly turned into a farce. Within the hour, the square was empty, save for Melon's corpse, and the cleaver, and the syrupy blood painting the ground.

The shadows around the square darkened, congealed. From them emerged several animals with unremarkable clothes and set, solemn faces. They gathered around Melon like pallbearers. One of the newcomers was a female coyote with her head covered by a dark shawl; it rested uneasily on her, the contours of the head beneath uneven. She bent over Melon and delicately gripped his wrist. It came up limply; rigor mortis hadn't yet set in. She saw the teethmarks and flashes of bone in his meat up to the elbow and shook her head, then produced a thin knife from her clothes, slipped it under his shirt, and started to cut. Within minutes he was naked before them, and they tilted their heads at the bright patterns of melon flowers tattooed into his pelt.

A stocky honey badger picked up the cleaver. His boots squelched in the blood as he returned to Melon. As one, the other animals stepped back and nodded, and the badger nodded back, knelt, and brought the cleaver down.

Melon gave back to the community, in his own way. His arms were unsalvageable, but the meat of his haunches and thighs was healthy and firm, courtesy of his gazelle side; his taste may have been sour in places, but if ground up and packed with the meat of pure herbivores, few would tell the difference. That lolling tongue would be a fine treat if sliced thin and fried. His fangs would make for daring jewelry, and his horns, when ground up and powdered, could be used to treat aches or fever. His offal would be gathered up and tossed into a vast concrete drainage ditch at the market's edge, and later that night, a hard rain would come and wash them into the dark and clean the blood off the square. A new day would dawn. The market would be fed.

Please enjoy.

Bursts of Light in the Abattoir

Two months later.

Summer had begun to slink away from the city like a frail thief; the nights grew longer, the air close and wet. These spaces between seasons always brought rain, and the residents and shopowners of the black market set up tarps to protect their shabby buildings from the drip. Those who frequented the place at this time of year got used to the drumming against plastic, that relentless pitter-pat. It followed them home, lodged in their heads as they tried to sleep.

It wasn't raining now, but a chilly mist hung in the air, looking like a swarm of midges in the lights. This weather forced some of the market's criminal population to reconsider their dress code. The Inarigumi, for example, were seldom caught without their qipao, but on nights like this, overcoats were advisable. Renne pulled hers around herself now as she stepped out of an alleyway mouth, where yellow police tape hung limp and garish against the stained brick walls.

The tape had been erected around a devastating scene. While the market's businesses centered around its main thoroughfare, there was also plenty being sold in the district's side streets and dead ends, and this used to be one of them. It was in ruins now. The pavement was cratered and scorched, the stalls reduced to a minefield of wood splinters and chunks of corrugated iron. Windows up top had burst from the force of the blast; they were blinded now, hastily covered with plywood. Renne wasn't the only one who'd disregarded the police barrier. There were a few forlorn ragpickers here, sifting through the rubble for anything they could sell or eat. In the lot's far corner an animal of uncertain shape squatted within a mossy green raincoat like an oversized fungus, a smoking pipe jutting out from the blackness beneath their hood.

A second vixen stepped up beside Renne and took in the scene. This one was taller, scraggly, and she had both eyes but a livid pattern of four slashmarks across her face, like it had been used for a drunken game of tic-tac-toe. Her name was Hash, and it could have been an alias, but she was the Inarigumi's chief enforcer, which among other things meant that she was not the sort of animal to whom one asked personal questions. She waited until Renne took out and lit a cigarette before she talked.

"Same as the last two?" she asked.

"Seems that way," said Renne, flicking off her lighter. "It wasn't a gasoline bomb or anything like that, otherwise half the block would've lit up. Just one big bang."

"And the shops...?"

"I checked. They were among the first to join the Butchers' network. Like you said, same as the last two."

"Shit."

“Yep,” she agreed grimly. “Three makes a pattern. This is a declaration of war.”

“Why now? We had a good thing going. Everyone’s chill with the Butchers these days, creepy bastards or not.”

“I don’t know. The market’s felt off ever since Melon’s little floor show two months back.”

Hash’s eyes narrowed. “You think this is the lions’ work?”

“The Shishigumi are finished. We’ve barely seen mane or tail of them since their boss bit it, and they were never a subtle bunch to start with.” She sighed and tapped ash onto the rubble. “Though it’s true that they’re only alive because we’ve been busy with this insanity instead. They’ve got some weird kind of luck, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, well, if we don’t finger a culprit soon it’s going to fall on us. That fossil Agrippa’s probably drooling at the opportunity to snuff us out for good.”

“I know. That’s why I told the girls to lie low. They went incommunicado last night. I’ll touch base with them after I talk to Karlov.”

“Good luck with that. That guy still gives me the willies.” Hash turned away, massaged the raw skin of her scars. “You know this was one of the only places you could get decent turtle meat? Put that in a stew and it goes down like silk. I’m in mourning, Rennie.”

“Yeah, I know the stall. And the old-timer in charge of it’s been having hip trouble, he doesn’t need this shit in his life.” She sighed. “We’ve got to have a whip-round, or something. Get the money together to put these guys back on their feet. One more thing to do after I talk with Karlov.”

“Anyone else know you’re having this meeting tonight?” Hash asked.

“I might have whispered a little something in Cruce’s ear.”

“For fuck’s sake, Rennie,” she said disgustedly, but Renne just smiled. “You’re making us look bad by cozying up to that damn cat.”

“He’s a decent guy when he’s not tweaking.”

“Yeah, and how often is that? Once, twice a year?”

“Given the choice between him, the lizards, and the lions it’s no contest. I’m going to the rendezvous. Find a hole to hide in and wait for my call, alright?” Her cigarette was spent; she went for more and the empty pack crumpled in her hand. “God dammit.”

“Here.” Hash took out her own pack and lightly tossed it over. Renne caught it and winked – or blinked, maybe, it was difficult to tell.

“Thanks. I owe you.”

“Damn straight.”

Renne gave the lot one final look, as if the destroyed stalls would somehow manifest from the thickening fog. When they failed to do so, she tucked the cigarettes into her coat pocket and turned away, her heels clacking down the streets. Hash remained where she was. The ragpickers continued along through their dismal orbits. The beggar with the pipe was still there; her nose wrinkled at a whiff of the foul, diesel-smelling smoke. She watched them for a long time, but they never moved.

* * *

You let them in, Rennie.

She could almost hear the market whispering it to her, carried on the fog. She waved it off. Yes, okay, even though the Butchers had become a force unto themselves years ago, they did technically owe their position to her initial sponsorship. What of it? Business was business.

Even today, no one quite knew what to make of them. They had no formal name. Animals called them the Fifth Family, the Inugumi, the Couriers, the Dogsbodies. But “Butchers” stuck best, even if they just delivered the meat instead of cutting it up. Usually. If some luckless sap should expire in the market’s streets, then their corpse might get a quick go-over and wind up in a series of paper-wrapped parcels across the stalls, but that was fairly uncommon. Roadkill didn’t fetch a very high price.

Everyone took them for granted these days. They didn’t remember how bad things used to be. The meat trade was easily the most corruptible business in animal society – demand for it was always sky-high, and if you were unscrupulous enough then you could get it from anywhere and gouge the price to your heart’s content. The Four Families grifted and scammed each other at every opportunity, encouraging rotten practices among the meat vendors, to the point where the market’s wares became scarcely edible. The shops had hawked mystery meat, flyspecked carrion, and of course there was the “Coroner’s Special,” a charming euphemism for funeral-fresh carcasses so packed with formaldehyde that they’d dissolve the throats of anyone who chowed down on them. Then, on a night much like tonight, the market had seen a new visitor, shivering in his army-surplus jacket. Karlov the Doberman, he’d said his name was. And he had a business proposition.

If he’d gone to any of the other Families then they would’ve had his teeth for cufflinks. But the Inarigumi were physically the weakest of the bunch, no denying it, so Renne had to get creative in order to keep her spot in the criminal hierarchy. And Karlov’s idea *had* been tantalizing, if faintly insane. He knew a few things about logistics, he’d said, and proposed an independent delivery network for the meat trade, staffed and run by the denizens of the black market, free from the Four Families’ influence. They could undercut all of the Families’ operation prices, and re-direct the funds to guarantee product quality instead – favor the ones who provided decent meat, choke out the scam artists. It would cause a ruckus, he’d need a few initial connections and someone to watch his back while they got set up, but if they held on then it would guarantee the Inarigumi a position in the market’s economy, to say nothing about their public image.

Renne had been intrigued but wary. Dogs made criminals uneasy; their high intelligence and skill at repressing their negative emotions often meant that dogs in the seedier parts of the city were undercover cops, or worse, genuine psychos. Karlov had been unnerving for a

variety of reasons, and still was. But she'd thrown caution to the wind, lent him some seed money, and watched in quiet shock as he'd plunged his claws into the city and dug himself a cozy little niche.

She was coming up on the rendezvous now, an old iron bench off the main street, pearly with raindrops. She sat down and got out her smokes. The cigarette's light lay on her face like a bloodstain.

Karlov must have been a native of this town, because he'd settled on a location fast and got some employees even faster. And as he'd said, the meat supply had gradually, tumultuously improved as more and more shops accepted the Butchers' custom, despite the other Families' misgivings, threats, and occasional attempts at arson. There were no more Coroner's Specials. Turned out customers were happy to know they wouldn't buy meat that'd make them puke out their stomach lining. And over the years, the Butchers' numbers grew beyond any census, and they became a shadow organization beneath the Families themselves. They had no common species, no defining characteristics, though all the ones Renne had seen did have the same undernourished build and humorless, melancholy air. They moved through the market like ghosts, bringing their cargo with them. And now someone was going around bombing the same businesses that Karlov had first used to get started. He had a nervous disposition. If he got nervous, that made Renne nervous.

Everyone in the know still unconsciously associated the Butchers with the Inarigumi. These attacks were painting a target on all the foxes' backs. So she'd told her underlings to disappear for a bit – with the exception of herself, who was the boss and had to be seen around town, and Hash, who had a reputation as one of the most vicious fighters in the underworld and was unlikely to be messed with no matter how bad things got – and set up this tête-à-tête with Karlov himself. He was a reclusive sort, unusual for a canine, but he'd eagerly agreed to see her whenever it was convenient.

The fog coalesced into raindrops. Renne grimaced and rubbed her eyepatch; the socket always ached on nights like these. During a turf war a few years back, Cruce, the Madaragumi's infamous leader, had tossed his katana aside and ripped the eye out with his bare claws. She'd regarded him with a certain fondness ever since.

Time passed. Her cigarettes dwindled. Vague shapes passed in the farther reaches of the alleys beyond, customers looking for their next meal, but the hour was late and the market didn't do much business in this kind of weather. The bombings were only making things worse. If the Butchers went on strike, and the meat supply somehow stopped, then animals would start looking for fresher prey. She didn't want to imagine what might happen to the Families after that.

Her lighter was getting too soggy to strike. She flicked again and again, with increasing frustration, and then a small hand drifted into her field of view holding a lighter of its own. It flicked, struck, and lit. She closed her eye and dragged deep.

On the bench beside her was a bent-whiskered mongoose in a patchy windbreaker, a small notch missing from his ear. He retracted the lighter and slipped it into his coat; Renne noticed that the pinky finger of his hand was missing. Behind her she could smell panther and red wolf, also wrapped in that strange, ashy scent of deprivation. It was one other eerie trait the

Butchers shared – they might have been normal civilians before Karlov hired them, but once they were on the job, they could be quite stealthy. She'd barely heard the rustle of her new friend's coat before he'd sat down.

"Nice night," said the mongoose.

"If you say so," said Renne.

"Karlov is ready for you, miss. In your own time."

"There's none like the present." She cast the cigarette down and ground it under her heel. "I hope you're all watching your backs tonight. Our midnight bomber's keeping tabs on you."

"We weren't followed. Please, this way."

The mongoose led her on, with his unseen companions at her back. The labyrinthine district unfolded before them. It was said that each of the Families held a secret of the black market, something that gave them an edge over their rivals. If it was true, then the knowledge of the Butchers' headquarters was definitely Renne's. There were animals who'd cut off their arms to know where she was going tonight. The sounds of the city beyond, already muffled, faded to nothing as they continued, beneath sagging clotheslines and soot-bricked tenements aglow with canned heat. At an anonymous squat gray building that stood apart in its own alley like a desert island, the mongoose stopped, faced her, and gestured. She sighed and handed over her weapons – the revolver, two knives in her coat, and a smaller stiletto belted against her ankle. It was a familiar ritual.

"After you," he said, and pulled open the door.

The entrance opened into a dingy and unlit foyer whose linoleum floors were cracked and smeared with ancient ashes. But if one were to pass through there, and open the second door at the back, they'd be greeted with an unusual sight. The second room was quite larger, almost as big as the square in which they held the Days of Depravity, and ranked with desks and telephones like a newspaper office; in those desks sat animals with the similar shabby attire and serious mien of the ones who'd escorted her here, taking calls, making notes. She caught snatches of their conversation as she passed.

"...eagle meat at a premium, but a medical history would be appreciated..."

"...hospital? Recent? What drugs were they taking before they..."

"...service interruptions shouldn't be significant. Deliveries will continue on..."

"...presence of bullets. We don't care how you get the carcasses, but for the sake of the buyers' teeth..."

It was a very *dog* thing to do, running a criminal enterprise like a call center. The phones were untraceable, equipped with voice modulators, and the numbers could only be procured by careful agreement, but the banality of it all was still a little unnerving, all these low voices trading flesh, corporate civility veneering ravenous appetite. She felt eyes on her as she

passed through, but paid them no mind. She went to the back again, to an elevator, and called it, and went down. Down.

The city was built on itself. There were tunnels and disused sewers going back for generations within its guts. She didn't know how Karlov had found this place, but apparently there'd once been a network of bunkers beneath the district – a remnant of the great war, maybe? – and the building above had nestled atop it like a toad on a log. He'd built the elevator and got the generators working, and suddenly the Butchers had all the space they would ever need.

The corridors beneath also had a corporate feel, ranked doors and buzzing fluorescents. Most of these rooms were vacant, as far as she knew, or used as storage for things better left unsaid. She walked through the dim halls until she came to a door that looked better-reinforced than the rest, a thin line of buttery light shining underneath. She knocked.

“Come in! It's open!”

She turned the knob and pushed. It took a bit of effort. This door and the adjacent walls could withstand explosives, if they had to. Karlov wrapped himself in careful paranoia like a hermit's shell.

She'd been to this office before, but the jarring contrast between it and the industrial desolation of the bunker outside still struck her like vertigo. It was spacious, if low-ceilinged, covered with plush burgundy carpet. Its shelves were lined with books, mostly medical journals and photo albums. Against one cinderblock wall was a small oaken desk, and Karlov was already stepping around it on his way to greet her, beaming wide, his gloved hands extended. He was slim but broad-shouldered, his eyes and fur the color of chocolate. If he'd still had a tail it would probably be wagging.

“Renne! Sorry to keep you waiting so long, I got caught up in things...”

“It's fine, Karlov.” She smiled and shook his hand. “Long time no see.”

“Yes, too long. Your scent's always welcome here, I can assure you of that.”

He tapped the side of his muzzle, which shone sickeningly in the overhead lights. Karlov was polite and affable as any dog, coming off like an over-eager librarian, but that muzzle clip was one thing about him that made her uneasy. Plenty of animals used prosthetics these days – mostly for their teeth or horns – and unless you were looking closely it would be hard to spot the difference. Muzzle clips were a different story. They were meant to cover up scars or deformations of an animal's snout, but none of them could get the fur texture quite right, and they gave off an unnatural plastic sheen that was often worse than whatever they concealed.

The day she and Karlov had met, he'd said that he'd been a photographer in a war – he didn't say which, not like it mattered, there was always another one somewhere. He'd worn the clip even then, and the gloves, and high-necked sweaters. She'd never pried into his past, but between all that gear, his missing tail, and his faintly mangled ears, she guessed that whatever he'd been through had been *really* bad. It clearly didn't affect his attitude, though.

“You know why I’m here,” she said.

“I do.” Suddenly all business. “We’ve come to the same conclusion about those bombings. Close the door, please?”

She did so. “Are your employees getting antsy?”

“No one’s been hurt, and I haven’t had any resignations. But we all feel the hostility. It’s difficult to service a market that wants you dead.” He sighed, plucking worriedly at his sweater sleeves. “I was always prepared for this to happen, but I thought it would come years ago. Do you have any leads yet?”

“No. It’s not the other Families, at least. They’re all idiots, but they’re not stupid enough to shit where they eat.”

“Mm. Agrippa and the Dokugumi still don’t much care for us.”

“If Agrippa had his way then we’d still be living in mud huts. But it wasn’t him, I’m sure of it.”

“Okay.” He nodded, and went to the shelves. “As it happens, we may actually have some evidence of who’s really responsible for this. It’s being stored in the lower tunnels. I want you to come have a look.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Evidence? From where?”

“Some of my employees weren’t too far from the first bomb site. They nicked a few things before the police came.” He reached to the top of the shelf and extracted a camera – a good one, she saw, its glossy surface shining like oil. “I’m a little nervous keeping it here at all. I just want to take a few pictures for posterity and get rid of the lot.”

“I didn’t know you still took photos. After the war...”

“You know how it is. Once you become good at something, it’s hard to stop doing it.” His smile became strained for a moment, but then he turned back to the bookcase, hooked his fingers along his side. “This way. The secret exit’s faster.”

The bookcase swung out on oiled hinges, revealing a stairwell beyond. *Secret exit*, Renne thought bemusedly. *Of course he’d have one of those.*

What she said was, “For someone who’s been here so long, you sure are ready to make a quick escape.”

“Old habits,” he replied. “Can’t know when your luck will turn bad.”

“True enough. But we’re going to fix this, Karlov. The black market’s had some...issues... this year, mostly thanks to the Shishigumi-”

“Yes, I’ve heard about their changes of leadership. First the herbivore and then the hybrid.”

“The second one didn’t work out too well. For anybody. But I’m going to make sure you don’t get caught up in the aftermath.”

“It means a lot to hear that from you,” he said. “We’re still business partners, after all.”

She beckoned to the doorway. “Shall we, then?”

Karlov hung the camera around his neck like a talisman and stepped through the doorway, and Renne followed. It led to a stairwell, heading down. The lighting here was even dimmer, dead completely in places, and her night vision strained through the dingy dark as they descended. She could hear the hum and thump of unknowable machinery in the spaces beyond these walls, the churning guts of the city. Her heels were loud as handclaps.

“Do you have all these tunnels mapped out?” she asked, mostly to fill the silence.

“Not even close. Just enough to let us get around the market. And they’re good for storage space, as you know. It’s nice and cool down here.”

Disused generator rooms and dorms, repurposed as meat lockers. Metal grates smeared with blood like rust. She shuddered a little at the thought.

“You should take shallow breaths,” Karlov said, opening another door. “The smell is a little ripe. I also have some rubbing alcohol, if you’d like.”

“I’m fine.”

“Alright.”

These tunnels were wider, arched, the walls glimmering with some kind of laminate sheen that reminded her of Karlov’s muzzle. And like he said, the smell here was worse – the iron tang of raw meat, spiced with sewage. In places the floor gave way to open grates through which even her night vision could see only an impenetrable darkness. She was starting to regret the heels.

“I don’t enjoy coming down here,” Karlov muttered. “You get used to the claustrophobia, but still.”

“I can sympathize. Maybe you can stop by for dinner after we’ve cleaned this mess up. Get some air.”

“I’ll consider it.” He stopped in front of a final door, its peeling surface stained with rust in abstract patterns. “This is the spot.”

She grimaced and covered her nose. There was something even fouler-smelling on the other side. Karlov saw her expression changed and nodded, grimly.

“It might be best if you see for yourself,” he said, and opened it. “After you.”

Renne stepped past him and he followed, shutting the door. She blinked, waited for her eyes to adjust.

She kept waiting.

Maybe this had been a boiler room once. From the walls and across the ceiling was a crazed geometry of iron piping, caked with scum and worse. But she couldn't understand these other shapes. These bodies hanging from the pipes, five, ten, two dozen, eyeless and toothless and skinned, their mouths yawning wide to show the darkness within. The stench of fox was cloying.

"Are you all right?" Karlov asked from somewhere.

The corpses of the Inarigumi hung before her in silent inquiry. One of them, its skinned hide still dripping, bore a cross-hatch of scars on its face. She couldn't breathe through this smell.

"Renne," Karlov said, louder. "Can you hear me?"

She turned to him, her eye brimming with tears. "I don't-"

The camera flash went off like a bomb inside her skull, blinding her; she yowled and staggered back and then felt gloved hands clamp around her throat and begin to squeeze. She reached for knives that weren't there and then clawed at the arms that gripped her but Karlov raised her up and slammed her against the wall once, twice, strangling her all the while, and her limbs grew weak and the room turned dim and that smell chased her down into unconsciousness, filling her until nothing remained.

"This was a very productive meeting," Karlov said, as Renne's eye rolled back. "On behalf of our organization, and my *other* business partner, allow me to say: thank you for the meal."

* * *

Legosi turned on the sink.

The Hidden Condo had shared bathrooms, one per floor. The toilets were unreliable, the pipes made disturbing sounds like the murmur of dead languages, and the mirrors were panels of fogged steel which rendered one's reflection hard to make out. He tried anyway, smoothing out the corkscrews of his fur, opening his mouth wide to see the pink smoothness of his bare gums. Satisfied, he took his toothbrush and got to work.

One of the hassles of having dentures was that he had to pop them out and clean them separate from the rest of his mouth. He liked to get in here early, to avoid awkward questions. He gargled, spat, wiped his mouth, and then turned to see Sebung standing there, still in her robe. She was never much of a morning animal but today she looked especially small and lost.

He waved anyway. "Good morning, Febun."

She blinked and said nothing. Legosi realized why this was.

"Oh. I neffer told you about my teef." He pointed to his mouth. "I had to haff them replafed. Long ftory."

Sebun continued to stare. One corner of her mouth had started to tug up like it was caught on a fishhook.

“Could you keep this a secret from the offer? I know I shouldn’t be embarrassed by it, but still-”

She turned away and a long, shrill giggle trailed out of her like a tinny birdsong. When she looked back at Legosi she was smiling again, though there were deep pits under her eyes.

“Thanks, Legosi. I needed that.”

“You’re welcome?”

“Um. Are you going to work today?”

“Yef.”

“...was that a yes?”

He nodded. “Yef.”

“Okay. Just do me a little favor? Don’t check the news until you get back home. Don’t ask why,” she said quickly as he opened his mouth again. “Just promise me.”

“Okay. I promise.”

“Thank you. You can go and put your teeth back in. I won’t tell.”

He looked at her quizzically, but then gathered his things and went back to his room. It hadn’t changed much since the day he’d moved in. The window was thick with condensation from the morning mist; in the corner, a space heater fought back the damp chill. His dentures were floating in a glassful of cloudy blue liquid. He poured it out, dried them off, popped them in. They rested snugly against his gums.

He’d thought this place was a little small the day he’d arrived, but he’d gotten used to having everything in arms reach. Resting beside his phone on the coffee table was a small bowl of fruit that Mugi had given him the other day. He took an apple, rubbed it against his sweater, bit, and then yelped and winced, massaging his cheek. His dentures always hurt for a little bit after he put them back in.

His phone buzzed. Legosi looked down at it, saw the number, and immediately felt his tail start to wag. He picked it up so quickly he almost dropped it.

“Hello, Louis!” he said.

“Legosi. It’s been a while.”

Louis seldom called, even though he’d bought Legosi this phone and had him learn to use it practically (though not literally) at gunpoint. The last conversation they’d had was a brief and apologetic one shortly after Melon’s death had hit the news. All of Legosi’s hopes of clearing

his record had gone up in smoke, and Louis had commiserated, said he'd keep looking into how to get the predatorial offense removed. Legosi had insisted it was all right, but as far as he knew, Louis was still looking.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I was about to – *ow* – go to work."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, no. I just put my teeth back in so I'm a little sore."

"What?"

He shouldn't have said that. "Nothing."

"No, really. What was that about your teeth?"

"It was nothing. I was just saying things. How are you?"

"I've been worse." A pause. *"Legosi, we need to talk."*

"We are talking."

"Face to face, I mean. Where do you work? I tried to Zoozle it but couldn't remember the name..."

"You want to see where I work?" He carefully stepped away from his shelves before his tail could knock something over. "That's great! We can get lunch! They do a kitsune-udon bowl that's really-"

"Legosi," he said wearily.

"Oh, right. I'll send you the address. But really, stop by at lunchtime. I can get you a good deal."

"I'm rich, I don't need a discount on...never mind. Judging by how cheery you are, I assume you don't know what happened last night. You need to read the news before I get there. It'll save me a lot of explaining."

His tail slowed. "But Sebun told me not to."

"Who the hell is Sebun?"

"She's my neighbor, a sheep. She's really nice. I think you two would get along great if you-"

"Legosi, please check the news," said Louis, his every word carrying a heavy freight of patience. *"I promise not to let your neighbor know."*

"All right. I guess I'll see you later? I take my break at noon, assuming the deliveries aren't too bad."

“That works for me. See you then.”

He hung up. Legosi stared down into the black mirror of his phone screen. The scars over his eye shone bright. The shiver he suddenly felt had little to do with the temperature. Louis was usually uptight, but this time he'd sounded almost hunted, like there'd been someone else watching over his shoulder. He finished the apple, then opened his news app, wondering what could have gotten both him and Sebun so worked up.

The front-page story had clear photographs. Legosi scrolled and read. Slowly, his tail drooped, and his ears pinned themselves back.

“Oh,” he said.

* * *

The Inarigumi's headquarters was in the shell of a massage parlor at the black market's edge, the building's façade covered with talismans bearing the family name. Its interior spread to the neighboring buildings and the streets below; Renne, too, had understood the value of a secret exit. It looked out on one of the market's more spacious streets, all the better for the foxes to see any potential threats. In turn, everyone saw what had been left there in the night.

The street was cordoned off by more caution tape, the air ablaze with sirens, but the evidence hadn't been removed just yet. Lying in neat rows like temple offerings were skinned fox heads, three dozen in all, stripped of ears and eyes and teeth. Their smooth meat was still dewy with last night's rain. As animals crowded around the barricade, the police forced them back, but flies still buzzed through, settling on what was left of the Inarigumi to eat their fill.

Bite Your Tongue Before You Swallow

The udon shop Bebebe was doing a brisk business, despite the gloomy weather. On days like this, every animal could do with a hot bowl of soup. But the massacre in the black market loomed over everything like weather in itself, and customers and staff alike were huddled in on themselves, their smiles a little strained, their laughter too long and loud. Sebun's bid to keep the news from Legosi had been a futile endeavor. He'd been wandering through an oppressive cloud of gossip regarding the Inarigumi's demise from the moment the shop opened. He watched the clock, waiting for Louis' arrival.

Nevertheless, his co-workers obliged him. When Legosi shyly said that he was expecting a friend to stop by during his lunch break, Sunaga made an ironclad reservation at one of the best tables. Though he was oblivious to it as ever, Legosi's reserved demeanor, hard work ethic, and delicate, fumbling movements – he still walked through the kitchen like someone navigating a minefield – had endeared him tremendously to the rest of the staff. Sunaga knew that if he didn't keep a table open for him then the waitresses would open one up themselves, even if it meant picking up his customers, chairs and all, and hurling them through a plate-glass window. When Louis finally walked in, clad in a pricy-looking anorak that was orange as a sunset, they saw Legosi's face light up and almost dissolved into puddles of goo on the spot.

The two of them sat down. Louis gave a curt greeting, clearly intending to get straight to business, but Legosi insisted that they eat first. Louis' own hunger won over his exasperation, and he relented. He watched with amusement as Miika brought them their bowls; she was beaming so wide it threatened to banish the rainclouds. Legosi didn't seem to notice how the middle-aged lion fretted over him like a doting grandmother.

"Thank you for the meal, I suppose," Louis said, breaking his chopsticks. Legosi didn't follow suit. He watched anxiously as Louis started to slurp.

"How is it?" he asked.

Louis stopped, blinked, smacked his lips. "This is very good."

His tail started up at once. "You really think so?"

"Zoozle reviews for this place were decent enough, but this balance of textures...the daikon in particular, not many places get that right." He tucked in again, with more vigor. "*Very* good. Eat yours before it gets cold."

Legosi didn't need telling twice. He finished his soup even faster than Louis did. Not five minutes later the empty bowls were sitting side-by-side, Louis delicately dabbing his face with a napkin.

"I'm glad to see that certain recent events haven't affected your appetite," he said.

Legosi's ears drooped. "Is it as horrible as the news made it sound?"

“Probably quite a bit worse. I was only involved with the black market for six months or so and barely scratched the surface of the atrocities that occurred there.” They’d both lowered their voices, speaking conspiratorially. “This is an unprecedented power shift. No one in that place is prepared for one of the Four Families getting wiped out overnight.”

“What were the Inarigumi like? Do you have any idea?”

“Ibuki told me a little bit. Supposedly the Inarigumi were the cleverest of the four. They lacked physical strength so instead they relied on subterfuge, backroom deals, that sort of thing. He didn’t like them but said they were a necessary balance to the other Families’ attitudes. So if they’re gone...” He looked away. “It’s going to cause a lot of unrest. To say nothing of those bombings.”

“I could hear them from my room,” Legosi said. And he could – the first time one of those explosions had gone off, the Hidden Condo’s residents all thought it was a fireworks display gone wrong or something. By the third one, Sebun had actually come to his room and asked to stay up with him for the night. They’d spent an awkward evening with the lights on, Sebun silently staring into her reflection in Legosi’s windowpane as if it would give her answers.

“That’s mainly what I wanted to talk to you about,” Louis said. “But first things first. You were ‘interning’ under that panda doctor Gouhin, right? Did he ever tell you about the Butchers?”

“I don’t think so,” Legosi said. Gouhin had in fact told him a great deal about the black market’s secret workings, but they’d been more rant than lesson, his bitter soliloquies wandering from topic to topic as Legosi helped out around his office.

“Long story short, they’re the ones responsible for delivering nearly all the meat to the black market. No one knows how many of them there are, or where they’re located – except maybe for the Inarigumi. And those bombings apparently targeted places significant to them. I think what happened last night might have been some kind of retaliation.”

“Against the Inarigumi? But why them?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t have enough information to confidently say. But it’s a very, very bad thing if they’ve suddenly gone hostile. I mean, look at you.” He gestured to Legosi’s uniform. “Imagine if everyone in the city who delivered food decided to up and start killing their customers instead. And they don’t wear uniforms like you do. You’d never see them coming.”

Legosi didn’t say anything, but he did steal a quick, worried glance outside. When he looked back, Louis was leaning forward, palms on the table, his gaze deadly serious.

“Legosi, listen to me. You need to get out of the Hidden Condo. Maybe out of the entire city.”

His jaw dropped. It took him a moment to snap it shut again. “You want me to move?”

“Obviously. There’s a civil war brewing in the market, the Butchers have apparently gone rogue, and your apartment is fifteen minutes away. You could walk into that place by

accident if you weren't paying attention on the way home. And the other Families *hate* you. Between your little mission to rescue Haru and your vigilante work with Gouhin, you've been a pain in their asses all year. The way things are going, someone might just decide to track you down and make an example of you. Maybe the entire building, if they get ambitious enough." He sighed and shook his head. "I've been speaking with the Shishigumi every so often. Agata, mostly. Things have been bad for them since Melon died. They don't have the strength left to hold back the other Families if the conflict boils over."

"I haven't done anything in the market forever," Legosi retorted. "Aside from hunting Melon, and from what you're telling me that was probably a good thing."

"I know that. But the foxes were *slaughtered* last night. We can't depend on rational thinking from the survivors."

"I won't leave Haru."

Louis gripped the sides of his head. This was the part he'd been afraid of. Suddenly Legosi had turned into a brick wall and he'd run right into it.

"She would understand if you had to lie low," he said. "Hell, maybe you could convince her to take a vacation with you, or something. Wait for this to blow over together. I could talk to her myself if you-"

"And it's not just her. I like my job. I like my neighbors. It's been hard, with the predator offense, but I'm happy where I am." He crossed his arms. "I'm not going to just run away from it."

"Legosi, they were skinned alive, for God's sake!" The nearby diners glanced over, raising their eyebrows. "What do you think will happen to Haru if she sees you like that? Or if they come after *her*?"

"They wouldn't."

"How can you be certain?"

He glared sullenly. "I just am."

"You insufferable mutt," he growled, and now the staff were taking notice too. He could see worried gestures out the corner of his eye. "This half-assed chivalry doesn't impress her, you know. If you want to be in a relationship with Haru then you need to do more than sit on your tail and wait for a miracle. Have you even kissed her yet?" Legosi deflated a bit. "Well?"

"Once," he muttered. "On the cheek."

"I can tell you from experience, it must be taking a *heroic* effort for her to wait for you like this."

"It is. But she knows we can't be together until my record's clean."

"So are you together or aren't you?"

“Stop it,” he said. His hackles had started to rise. “What about you? Have you said anything to Juno yet?”

Louis flushed red. “Wha...th-that’s completely off-topic, and you...how do you even know about that?”

“She told me that she was in love with you. She even said it on the news.”

“She did *what?!?*”

They had wandered so far away from the original subject that they’d entered Here Be Dragons territory, and Bebebe’s other patrons were enjoying the show. It was a novelty to see a spat between herbivore and carnivore in polite company.

“You can’t look down on me like this, Louis,” Legosi said, leaning in. “I can see it on your face. You also know what it’s like to feel paralyzed by love.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, except that it sounds like it came from a knockoff greeting card. What I do know is that only one animal at this table is still a virgin, and it sure as hell isn’t me!”

Their foreheads were almost touching, teeth grit, the space around them so full of tension that it made their fur stand on end. Then, all at once, they slumped back in their chairs like puppets with their strings slashed, and everyone in the restaurant remembered to breathe.

“I’m a failure of a male,” Legosi said hollowly.

“Don’t be stupid. You’re just...far too responsible for your own good.” Louis groaned and sat up straight. “But really, Legosi, can’t you at least get an apartment somewhere else? Closer to Haru, even. You still have Yafya’s money, don’t you?”

Legosi’s guilty look said it all. Yafya, too, had sympathized with him in the wake of Melon’s demise – he’d gotten in touch the week after, on the phone. Legosi wasn’t sure how Yafya had acquired his number, but he supposed the Beastar didn’t have to worry about such trifling things as privacy laws.

“I would still clean your record if I could,” he’d told him. “But now it’s gotten political. If the Sublime Beastar absolved a predatorial offender sight unseen, then my image would be irreparably damaged. Don’t give up hope. I can apply pressure in subtler ways. Just be patient.”

Even though their “contract” hadn’t been completed, he’d wired Legosi an additional ten million yen as further apology, making twenty million in total. Legosi hadn’t touched the money, did his best not to even think about it. It sat and stewed in his bank account, a perpetual reminder of his failure.

“I’m just not comfortable spending it,” he said. “Not on myself, at least. I don’t deserve it.”

“I think Haru would strongly disagree.”

“Besides, I can support myself just fine with the job I have.” He looked up at Louis. “Maybe I should just donate it or something. Like, what about all the animals who were hurt in those bombings? They could probably use it a lot more than I could.”

“Legosi, that’s completely...” Louis stopped, and stared, a sudden faraway look in his eyes. “That’s a fantastic idea.”

“What? What is?”

Louis leaned forward again. He was actually grinning now, which made Legosi flinch away – expressions of genuine joy were deeply unnatural on that deer’s face.

“Listen,” he said. “You’re right. The market is hurting after those attacks, and with the Inarigumi suddenly gone I bet there’s a big dispute on who will pay for the damage. But if you send that money to the market...”

“How? You said I can’t go there.”

“Transfer it to my account. I’m the heir to the Horns Conglomerate, fast-tracking something like that would be child’s play. I’ll wire it to the Shishigumi, and they’ll use it as leverage to make sure the Dokugumi and Madaragumi leave you alone. I know for a fact they’re going to get dragged into this mess, and they need to regain face after what happened with Melon. This’ll give them some breathing room, and ensure your safety as well.”

Legosi nodded. “And it’ll help the victims.”

“Yes, yes, also that. I don’t need all the money either. Fifteen million will be more than enough, and you can use the remaining five for yourself after you’ve managed to swallow your pride. But I really believe this will work. The Families will probably be tickled pink to know that the Beastar’s cash will be used to benefit the place he despises most.” He checked his phone. “Could we head to a bank now? The sooner we get on top of this, the better off we’ll be.”

“I still have the rest of my shift-” he began, but when Louis gave him a leaden glare he added, “-but I’ll talk to my boss.”

He got up from the table and approached the counter. Several of the waitresses hurriedly tried to look like they’d been busy as he poked his head into the kitchen. Sunaga was reviewing orders and didn’t even look up when Legosi said his name.

“Sunaga, sir, can I have the rest of the day off? I know it’s still the lunch rush, but my friend-”

He dismissively waved his wing. “Go, Legosi. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Is it really okay?”

“It’s really okay. Don’t catch a cold out there.”

He nodded gratefully and receded. Thomas looked a bit resentful; he'd been washing dishes for three hours straight.

"You're really going to just let him walk like that?" he grumbled. "Must be nice."

"Whoever that deer is, it's clear that he and Legosi are very good friends," said Sunaga, returning to the orders. "He wouldn't leave like this unless it was important."

Donson scoffed. "Good friends, really? They were at each other's throats for a little while there. I thought someone was gonna call the cops."

"Yes, and then they were fine again. You have to be quite close with someone to casually lose your temper at them like that." Sunaga let out an amused hoot. "That pup's looked more alive than he has in weeks."

Legosi, heedless to their gossip, hung up his uniform and returned to the restaurant. Louis had already paid, with an exorbitant tip, and was waiting by the front door.

"Let's go," he said.

It was still gray outside, but the drizzle had tapered off. The pavement was the color and luster of sealskin. It reminded Legosi of Zagan. In this part of town, if the wind blew right, he could smell the ocean.

"Lead the way," he said.

"Wait," said Louis. "You've got udon on your snout."

"What? Where?"

"Bend down and I'll get it for you."

Legosi complied, and then yelped as Louis grabbed him by the scruff and lifted his upper lip. He pulled back a second later, but not fast enough – Louis was looking up at him with a satisfied little smirk.

"So that's what you were babbling about on the phone this morning," he said. "Do I even want to know why you're wearing dentures now?"

"I lost my fangs," Legosi muttered, rubbing his cheek.

"You lost them," Louis repeated flatly. "Did you check between the couch cushions?"

"Knock it off. You wear fake antlers, don't you?"

"Yes, but unlike my antlers, your fangs don't fall out and grow back every so often." His eyebrow went up. "Or do they?"

"They don't."

“I had to make sure. You’re just so full of surprises lately.”

“You’re in a good mood all of a sudden.”

“You know, I really am.” He set off, strolling past Legosi. “Wonders never cease.”

* * *

The Shishigumi were headed to a lunch date of their own.

In better days, the lions’ ranks would have filled an entire street, pushing bystanders aside with their sheer presence like an incoming storm front. Now they were a furtive nucleus clustered around Free, shoulders hunched, head down. The few pedestrians out at this time of day pointed and whispered as they passed, and they had to pretend not to hear. Most of them kept up stony faces, but Agata was visibly nervous.

“I’ve never been to one of these before,” he said. “Is there anything I should know?”

“Save it ‘til we’re there,” Miguel grunted.

“Anyone got a light?” Free asked, and Jimma offered him a matchbook. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit up. Free wasn’t much of a smoker, but he felt one was warranted today.

The Families seldom got together for anything other than a turf war, but when they did, it was always at a small courtyard café nestled at the center of a twisting network of alleys, where the surrounding walls were windowless and there were plenty of easy escape routes. Kopi Luwak was served there, and the gang leaders would sip their drinks and discuss, with thinly concealed hostility, the intended future of the black market. It had been over two years since one of these was last convened; Free, Dolph and Ibuki had been at the front of their group, just behind the old boss. The one Louis had shot dead.

They stopped at an alleyway mouth. Derelicts and pandhandlers clustered here as well, but they all stopped short at this entrance, as if repulsed by a magnetic field. There was a foul stench in the air here, like diesel or gasoline, and it made several of the lions grimace. They walked on, and Dope stepped up behind Agata and spoke quietly into his ear.

“Stay at the back of the group and keep your mouth shut,” he said. “Free does the talking. No one else.”

“Got it,” Agata said.

“We all have to keep an eye on the other bosses. You and Miguel watch Cruce. You two are the strongest of us, and if he flips out then you might have to fight him off. Don’t pull your gun unless you absolutely have to. It’ll set off a bloodbath in there and we’re outnumbered.”

“What about Agrippa?”

“The rest of us will be watching him. He won’t attack us, but that lizard is always plotting something.”

“Both of you shut up,” Free said, and stomped out his cigarette. “We’re here.”

The courtyard’s cobblestones were uneven and the walls were slimy with moss, but it was dry here, and cleared of every table except one. The others had already arrived, the Family leaders at the table with their gangs massed in the adjacent alleys. In one chair sat a massive Komodo dragon in a black woolen greatcoat and almost comically tiny horn-rimmed spectacles; he gave Free a curt nod as he approached. In the other was a skinny leopard in a ragged and stained *hitatare* and fedora, the hatbrim pulled low over his eyes. He was utterly still, except for his thumb restlessly rubbing up and down the hilt of his katana. The two leopards behind him kept up brave faces but kept glancing down at their boss like there was a detonator countdown on the back of his neck.

Free pulled up his chair and sat down. “Agrippa. Cruce.”

“Free. So you’re the head of the Shishigumi these days,” Agrippa said, and smiled mirthlessly. “A lion leading other lions. What a novel idea.”

Leaders of the Families came and went like the seasons – this was a dangerous business, after all – but no one present at this meeting could recall a time when Agrippa was not the head of the Dokugumi. His age was impossible to guess, because he was one of those animals who grew harder instead of older, like a petrified tree; the only true hint was in his voice, which was a thin and papyrus-dry rasp that sounded like it should have come from a far smaller beast’s throat. He towered over his subordinates and stood a head taller than the Shishigumi themselves, those little glasses only accentuating his size. He was a freak of nature, a missing link between civilized animals and the dinosaurs of antiquity, and even in these strange and violent times he felt like an essential part of the black market itself, as though the chaotic architecture of this place had been built just to accommodate him. He hadn’t deigned to show up at a Day of Depravity in years; instead he sent his lieutenant, Zeke, a masked and whip-thin young reptile who now stood behind Agrippa’s chair and regarded them all with slit and sleepy eyes. Little was known about Zeke. He was reputed to be the quietest criminal in the city, besides the Shishigumi’s own Sabu, and rumors abounded regarding the horribly creative uses he had for the vials of venom he carried at all times.

As one might expect, Agrippa was also by far the most conservative of the Family heads. Renne’s coalition-building and the Shishigumi’s innovative choices in leadership had displeased him greatly. Free could almost smell his smugness as he poured their coffee.

“Let’s get right to the matter at hand,” he said, distributing their cups. “We all know why we’re here. Free, would you agree that the gory display we witnessed this morning was mostly likely the work of the Butchers?”

“Seems that way.” Free sniffed his drink, guessed that any poison Agrippa might use would be odorless anyway, then shrugged and sipped.

“And what makes you say that?” Agrippa asked patiently.

“The Inarigumi would’ve gotten snuffed out sometime since the last bombing, when Renne sent them all into hiding. But we never even heard a struggle. Only way that could’ve

happened is if they got found by someone who knew the city as well as we did, and who they didn't view as a threat. There ain't many animals who fit that bill other than the Butchers."

"Correct," Agrippa said, and Free's eye twitched; the lizard's condescension was palpable. "In addition, Cruce has kindly informed me that Renne was on her way to speak to Karlov the night of her death. She may well have perished at his hands."

An incoherent snarl emerged from under Cruce's hat. Both the Shishigumi and Madaragumi tensed up, but the moment passed and he again went still.

"I haven't been able to contact any of the Butchers or Karlov himself," Agrippa continued. "Yet this morning's deliveries were right on schedule."

"They're acting like it never even happened?" Free asked.

"That would appear to be the case. So, Renne is dead, our market is now at the mercy of her murderers, and we have no reason to believe that these bombings will cease, either." Agrippa folded his hands and loomed over the table. "I will be clear. None of us are fond of each other. We've had our spats, our little plans, our rises and falls." He glanced at Free when saying that last word. "But this is unacceptable. This is *bad for business*."

They all knew what he meant. The police only suffered the black market's presence because it kept all the city's meat addicts confined to one place – and let the cops themselves grab a bite every now and then too, when it suited them. If the food supply stopped, their customers would start snatching live prey off the streets, and the city would destroy the market and crucify all of them in response. Overnight, the Butchers had gone from a lifeline to an anchor around their necks.

"So what do we do?" Free said. "You sound like you've already got it all figured out."

"Let's start with the bombings. They're most likely being perpetrated by outsiders. The explosives they're using are--"

"The good shit," Cruce growled, and everyone's hearts skipped a beat again. He'd raised his head just enough to lance the Shishigumi with one eye. The sclera was entirely bloodshot. Not an encouraging sign.

Before Melon's death and the Shishigumi hitting rock bottom, the Madaragumi had been the weakest of the Four Families, and Cruce was at once the clearest example and cause of their fall from grace. Just about every feline criminal in the city was a Silvervine addict to some extent, but Cruce's abuse took it to hitherto-unexplored heights; there were rumors he'd started grinding up the entire plant and snorting it ages ago. Silvervine provoked euphoria and heightened aggression, and while Cruce seldom seemed very euphoric these days, he had aggression to spare - a snappish, shivering, emaciated wreck who was only coherent during their turf wars, and just barely. Even the tattoos under his shabby samurai garb were faded and shriveled, a sad reminder of the warrior he'd been before the Vine had strangled the life out of him. No one knew why he hadn't just been assassinated and replaced, but the Madaragumi were said to be a sentimental bunch.

Cruce's inexplicable closeness with Renne was an open secret among the Families. All of them had been dreading his reaction to the news of her demise. But if Agrippa was nervous, he didn't show it. He just nodded courteously at him and carried on.

"Thank you, Cruce. As he said, we're probably dealing with high-quality controlled explosives here. The sort that actual militaries might use, not the improvised nail or gasoline bombs you'd expect a native of the district to cobble up. It matches the nature of the blasts, plus I've noticed a particular lingering odor around the bomb sites." He solemnly tapped the side of his snout. "It's unpleasant in a way both indescribable and unforgettable."

Free gulped the rest of his coffee and smacked the mug down. "So we've got some asshole trying to spark a civil war on top of the Butchers running amok. Fuckin' great."

"Threats everywhere you look," Agrippa sighed. "This is what happens when you deal with outsiders."

"What's the plan, then? We've got to find the bomber, get back at Karlov somehow..."

"Karlov is untouchable for the time being. I've tried to locate him before and never had any success, and his headquarters' location died with Renne. I'm going to speak to some old contacts of mine, try and lay down groundwork for continuing the meat trade when we inevitably expel the Butchers. As for you, Cruce," he said, and the leopard jerked in his seat. "The Madaragumi are the most numerous among us right now. I want you to take to the streets and keep the peace. That means no pointless swagger, no starting fights."

"Fine," Cruce said.

"I mean it." Agrippa's papery voice had a serrated edge now. "The quieter we are, the easier we can hear the Butchers' footsteps, and the fewer excuses the police will have to sweep us out. Until this situation is over, the black market is to become a temple of *immaculate serenity*. Is that understood?"

"Heard you the first time." Cruce's grip on his katana was white-knuckle.

"You're leaving the bomber to the Shishigumi?" Free asked.

"By process of elimination, yes, though I'm not expecting much," Agrippa said, and Free's coffee mug nearly cracked in his grip. "You're in a rather dismal state these days. I suppose your species' much-vaunted 'divinations' might give you an edge. Barring that, just stay out of our way."

The Kopi Luwak was doing its job. Free could feel it pounding through his blood. This ancient reptile's dismissive gaze was making him see red. Meanwhile, behind the other lions, Agata suddenly jolted in surprise and slapped his pocket; he took a moment to make sure no one had noticed, and then ducked behind Miguel, pulling out his phone.

"Here's a thought," Free said. "Why're we looking for another culprit at all?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He jabbed a finger at Agrippa. “The Butchers were able to take out the Inarigumi ‘cause they were laying low after the bombings. Ain’t it just as possible they set the bombs off themselves? There’s even a fancy military term for that shit, right? ‘Because of bells?’”

“*Casus belli*,” Agrippa said dryly. “The thought did occur to me, but the Butchers deliberately destabilizing a market they’ve built up for half a decade is a level of irrationality I’m not prepared to accept. And then there’s the question of where they could have acquired military-grade-”

Cruce sprang up and hurled the table aside. It flew the length of the courtyard, the coffeepot spewing Kopi Luwak in rich brown streams, the mugs shattering. Free skidded back in his chair as Jimma and Sabu stepped in front, hands tucked into their suit jackets, but the leopards nearest Cruce had gotten a grip on his arms and held him back. His froth-flecked jaws snapped inches from Free’s snout; his teeth were crooked and yellowed, his breath a reeking cloud of rot and spoiled meat.

“Boss, calm down!” one of the leopards begged. “You can’t do this shit here!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Cruce screamed, but his bloodshot eyes were locked on Free as he said it. “This is all your fault, you fucking traitor! You let that deer and that goddamn mutant into our market and it ruined everything! What the hell gives you the right to sit here and act like you’re still our equal? You call yourselves felines?! *You’re a fucking disgrace!*”

The other leopards finally wrestled him back into his seat and he sat there hugging himself like a lost child, his breath trailing off to sobs. The lions relaxed by inches. All the Madaragumi looked mortified.

“What a waste of good coffee,” Agrippa remarked. “Zeke, could you please retrieve the table?”

Zeke nodded and did so, setting it between the three bosses once more. Free pulled his chair forward again, kept his hands beneath the table to hide how they shook.

“While Cruce was characteristically vulgar about it, I understand where he’s coming from,” Agrippa said. “There is a natural order to the black market, Free. You and Renne both meddled with it, and now the rest of us have to live with the consequences.”

“What, because of Louis?” Free growled. “Spare me the lecture, you prehistoric fuck. You’re just pissed off that you weren’t top of the food chain for a little while.”

Agrippa didn’t rise to the insult. “The deer was a charming experiment, but this culture of ‘equality’ that he brought about led to Melon. That maniac very nearly corrupted the entire market. He destabilized us. The Butchers’ behavior, these bombings...none of it would have been possible without the chaos that your changes in leadership created.”

“You’re talking out your ass.”

“I’m speaking from experience,” Agrippa said. “Killing Melon was a good start, and you have my condolences for Dolph, but you’ll have to do more if you want us to view you as an

ally instead of a liability.”

Free’s claws dug into the tabletop. “You just said that you’re not expecting much, so what the fuck else do you want from us? We’ve paid enough, you bastard! You just want to rub us out and take the meat trade for-”

Agata shouldered his way to the front of the group. The other lions looked on in quiet horror; they were having flashbacks to the time that he’d mouthed off to Melon, and doing that to Agrippa would have far worse consequences than a fork through the paw. But instead he bent down to Free and whispered something to him. Free’s expression went from annoyed, to contemplative, and then a slow grin spread across his chops that made even Agrippa shift uneasily in his seat. It was the first time that the lizard had looked off-balance since the meeting began.

“Something you’d like to share?” Agrippa asked.

“Is there ever,” Free said. “Boys, what’s that word for a real nice coincidence?”

“Serendipity,” Hino said promptly.

“There it is. I got some serendipity to lay down on you all.” He propped his elbow up on the table. “The black market’s all fucked up after those bombings. Gotta fix it, right? So how’s fifteen million yen sound?”

“From who?” Cruce snarled. “Your red deer sugar daddy?”

“Even better. You remember Legosi, that grey wolf who was beatin’ up our clientele last year? The Sublime Beastar hired him to track down Melon and gave him a sack of cash in advance. He wants to re-invest it in the bombing victims.”

“Bullshit,” Agrippa said harshly. Free’s grin just widened.

“We got to know him a little better before that shit at the Day of Depravity went down. He’s absolutely the type who’d make this offer.”

“With no strings attached? How naïve can you possibly-”

“One string. He lives at the Hidden Condo. He wants us to leave him and his friends alone while we sort out our shit here. Which we were plannin’ to do anyway, so from where I sit, it sounds like a win-win.” He looked around the courtyard. “What do you say? We putting this up for a vote? I’m gonna go with yes.”

“Absolutely not,” Agrippa said. “No more damned outsiders.”

“Take the money,” Cruce said, and Agrippa glared daggers at him. “The idea of taking a single yen from that fucking horse makes me wanna puke, but the victims won’t care.” He met Agrippa’s gaze. “It’s what Renne would’ve wanted.”

“Two to one,” Free said. “There we have it.”

“Spend it right or I’ll finish what that hybrid started,” Cruce said.

Agrippa’s lips peeled back, baring the craggy mountain range of his teeth. Then he sighed again and ran his hands down his face, carefully wiping the anger away. He took out a plus-sized cigarette – one of the brands typically intended for bears – and clamped it in his jaws. Zeke lit it, not taking his eyes off the others.

“On that note, I believe we can conclude this meeting,” said Agrippa, perhaps a bit louder than he intended. “Your point’s been made, Free, but I will reiterate: all of us need to produce results, and fast. I doubt Karlov will keep up this masquerade much longer. Zeke, let’s go.”

He rose and stalked off. Cruce got up too, unsteadily, picking his katana up off the ground. Free watched him go, saw how his fellow Madaragumi had to support his weight. Either Renne’s death had hit him even harder than they’d thought, or the damage his addictions were wreaking on his body had gone terminal. Maybe both.

“Let’s fade,” he said to the other lions. “We’ll chat once we reach the headquarters.”

The skies had darkened during their talk, promising further rain. The panoply of neon signs crowding the market walls flickered into life as the Shishigumi navigated the streets. Animals milled to and fro, giving them a wide berth. The Shishigumi watched every one of them closely. Paranoia of the Butchers had settled in all their minds.

The dilapidated pagoda that they used as their HQ had also seen better days. The front gate was piled high with garbage and marred with slanderous graffiti calling them whores, herbivore-lovers, tomorrow night’s meal. But as bold as other animals got, they still didn’t dare venture into the compound itself, and the lions breathed easy once they entered the front yard. Free turned on his heel and riveted Agata to the spot with his one-eyed stare.

“So, cub. You’ve been gossiping with Louis behind our backs?”

Agata gulped. “N-no, I wasn’t. He called me. Started to call me. He was worried about us! After all we’ve been through, I wanted...I mean, it was nice. To know that he still cared. You know?”

“Hm. Get him on the line, would you?”

Agata got out his phone and dialed. Free reached over and plucked it from his paw as it started to ring. Louis’ voice came through.

“What is it, Agata? Something else you needed?”

“It’s Free.”

“Oh.” There was a moment of careful silence. *“Hello, Free. It’s been a while.”*

“Two months and change, by my count.”

“I assume Agata told you about my proposition. Is it acceptable?”

“Yup. I got to drop the bombshell right on that scaly prick Agrippa’s lap. You should’ve seen the look on his face.”

“I’ll wire you the funds tomorrow morning. Just send me the Shishigumi’s account info. I assume it’s been changed since I was your leader.”

“Yeah, we’ve swapped some stuff around. I’ll take care of it.”

“Good. Free, listen. About the last time we spoke...you’re right that it was a stupid thing to do. There’s no hard feelings, I mean.”

Free turned away from the Shishigumi, so they couldn’t see his face. “I was being an asshole, kid. You deserved better than that. This whole song and dance ain’t some big apology, is it?”

“No. It’s just a tidy solution. To your problems and Legosi’s.”

“We’ve still got problems aplenty, but this helped. Thanks, Louis. And in case you still needed telling, stay the hell away from this place. It’s gotten real bad since you were here last.”

“I know. But keep in touch. I’ll help you through this any way I can.”

“Appreciated. Have a good night. Stay dry.”

The call broke off. Free lowered the phone and looked up at the pagoda’s roof, a scratch of deeper black in the slate-grey dusk. Agata approached him cautiously.

“Uh, Free? Can I have my phone back?”

“Yeah, take it. How often has he been calling?”

“Not often,” he said, taking the phone. “Every couple of weeks, maybe.”

“I really wish he was still with us,” Jimma muttered. “No offense, boss.”

Hino crossed his arms. “We’re not the only ones who think so, either. Animals on the street still remember him fondly. ‘The Prince of the Black Market,’ he’s called. Like he’s going to come back and set all this right.”

“That’s a nice dream,” said Free. “But they shouldn’t hold their breath. Feels like we’ve reached the end times.”

“We won’t make it easy for them,” said Miguel. “Right?”

Free didn’t answer him right away. He still had his head raised, scenting the air. He’d been in the black market all his life, rummaging for scraps out of offal bins since he was old enough to walk, and all of its scents were known to him. He breathed deep as the wind blew and took them in: the iron and salt of raw meat, the steam grates’ sour musk, the sad limp aroma of laundry hung out in weather that would never let it dry. But a new smell penetrated that bouquet, more remembered than inhaled, and it made him shiver. Burning gasoline but more

acidic, a scent that caught in your nose like a sea urchin, all harsh spikes. They'd all picked it up just before meeting the other Families. It smelled like impending doom.

* * *

Louis replaced his phone, checked to make sure the train platform was still empty, and then bent over and gingerly massaged his leg. It ached like a rotted tooth on nights like this.

He'd taken Legosi to a nearby bank and performed the necessary financial wizardry under the eye of a bewildered and faintly suspicious teller, but flashing a few of his credentials was all it took to make the management fall at his feet – or foot, whatever. He'd kept a shell account from back when he'd been the Shishigumi's boss to hide his business from Oguma, and it nicely served to hold the fifteen million that Legosi had graciously donated. They'd said their goodbyes and Louis had shooed him away and set off home. After recent events, his father became a touch anxious if he stayed out too late.

He had coffee scheduled with Juno tomorrow, as well. Maybe he could pick her brains regarding this broadcasted declaration of love that Legosi had told him about. The wolf might be dumb as a bag of hammers but he'd cut a bit close to the quick when he'd brought up Louis' own recent travails in romance. He hadn't spoken much to Azuki since their last disastrous attempt at sex, and his and Juno's clandestine kiss was a subject left delicately untouched. Shortly after Melon's death, his father had actually looked him in the eye at dinner and asked if he simply had no interest in females. It really was too grievous to be borne.

Maybe that was why he'd decided to go out that night. On the whole, it hadn't been one of his brighter ideas.

Louis breathed into his hands, shoved them into his jacket. The chill this time of year was unbearable. It got under his fur no matter how much he layered up.

He'd had a premonition, of sorts. A gnawing certainty that the Shishigumi were in terrible trouble. So he'd indulged in a bit of nostalgia, dressed in the ragged garb typical of livestock and set a literal, exorbitant price on his head, and walked right up to the lions' front door. Free had been newly anointed as their leader, stewing in their disgrace, and their meeting hadn't gone well. Louis had watched Free bash entire gangs into pulp during brawls in the black market, but he'd never seen him so angry as he'd been on that night. He'd slept poorly that whole week. He'd been worried that his foolhardiness had tainted his strange, bittersweet relationship with them for good.

So maybe he'd fibbed a little over the phone. Maybe this was an apology, of sorts. But it was still the practical thing to do.

The train's lights emerged on the horizon. They washed over him, and his antlers' shadow was printed on the billboard like the branches of a great tree. He boarded and sat by the window, and the damp air chewed away at his eaten leg as he stared outside, watching the city sink into another uncertain tomorrow.

Sweet Talk Leaves a Bitter Aftertaste

The next day gave the city its first glimpse of the sky for a while, thin capillaries of blue through the cloud cover's stretched gray skin. The weather forecasts were not optimistic, but for now, everyone had a little bit more spring in their step.

The café Hi-Collar was one of the more upscale coffee spots in the city, and especially famed for its pastries. It also wasn't too far from Cherryton, which made it an ideal spot for Louis' regular meetings with Juno – she indulged her sweet tooth, he covered the bill, and they both got to discreetly pump each other for information as they snacked. Louis used Juno to keep tabs on the tumultuous goings-on inside his old school, which was still straining under the newly-implemented segregation policies. Juno, in turn, gave Louis endless grief about his personal life.

Not too long before Melon's untimely demise, he'd tried to torpedo her burgeoning crush on him by telling her about Azuki. He'd expected her to cancel their future get-togethers, or at least learn to talk about something else. Instead she'd just doubled down on interrogating him about the current status of his relationships – with his fiancée, with his classmates, with Legosi. It was that classic canine perseverance. Doggedness, you could call it. He really should have known better.

Hi-Collar was a cozy place, two-tiered, the floors and furniture all varnished wood. It was decorated with an entire hanging garden's worth of potted plants, and the greenery and chlorophyll-scented air was a refreshing break from the dingy dampness outside. They'd taken to reserving a table in a quiet corner of the upper floor, trading gossip beneath the nearby animals' racket. But Juno was unusually subdued today. She picked at her cake when she'd normally devour it in three bites.

"No appetite today?" Louis said, sipping his espresso.

"Not much. It's this weather."

"I know what you mean. It drags down everything."

"Is your leg doing okay? With the dampness and all."

It throbbed. "No complaints. How's the club going? I recall that rehearsals always suffered this time of year."

Juno put her fork aside. She'd traded out her skirts and blouses for a cable knit sweater-and-trouser combo, and as she looked out the nearby window, Louis thought that it looked quite flattering on her. He then forced himself to forget he'd thought it.

"We're still together, at least," she said. "Bill's cram sessions pulled us through. But I think the pressure's getting to him. He acts all macho but he's actually pretty high-strung."

"Trust me, I know. He made that clear during my final play at Cherryton."

“Adler, right? When he carved up Legosi’s back.” She looked back at him. “Kai told me about it.”

He nodded. “In fairness, Legosi did throw the first punch.”

“I guess that makes them both idiots.”

“It does indeed.” He took another gulp of his coffee, to steel himself, and then plunged into dangerous waters. “We actually met yesterday, over that ugly business in the black market.”

Her face fell. “Oh God, Louis, tell me you’re not getting involved in that.”

“Not at all,” he lied. “I just told him not to do anything foolish. Futile, I know, but then we moved onto other subjects.”

“Such as?”

“Your feelings towards me, for one thing,” he said, and Juno’s big, wet eyes narrowed dangerously. “He said that your crush on me was a bit more serious than I first credited. Something about you proclaiming your love to a news crew?”

He braced himself – Juno wasn’t shy about showing off her emotions – but after a long, long moment, she just huffed and pulled out her phone, ear twitching.

“This sucks,” she said. “My schedule for today’s already packed, and now I have to kill Legosi.”

Something told him that she wasn’t entirely joking. “Please don’t.”

“No, it’s fine, I know where he lives. I’ll just step out and kill him after we finish up here and get back to school in time for dinner. Good thing it’s the weekend...”

“It’d make me sad.”

“Would it really.”

“Yes. Utterly distraught.” His deadpan could have withered the plants.

She gave him a sly little smile and put the phone away. “I’ll make sure to tell him that.”

“You still talk with him?”

“Every now and then. Him and Haru. She wants to know why you don’t call, by the way.”

Oh, where to begin. The fact that they’d been sleeping together and now they weren’t, the fact that he’d spent half a year in charge of the same organization that had tried to molest and eat her, the fact that she and the wolf he had to very tentatively call his best friend were now in a relationship so uncertain that it was practically quantum. Louis had spent more than a few nights staring at her number in his phone before shutting it off and getting back to his

studies. He'd accepted that they were both different animals than the ones who had first made love in that garden shed. Or at least he'd told himself that until it had sounded believable.

"It's complicated," he said, and finished his coffee. "But she's always welcome to get in touch."

She rolled her eyes, speared and devoured the rest of her cake, then patted her mouth daintily with a napkin. That constant contrast always kept him off-guard – beartrap-jawed predator one second, awkward adolescent the next.

"I went running to Legosi after you told me you were engaged," she said. "I thought he might be able to give me some advice on how to deal with inter-species romance."

"And did he?" he asked, with skepticism.

"He did, kind of. But I learned way more from what we saw. We went to a café a lot like this one. Two wolves on a date. And everyone treated us...differently."

She slowly turned, panning the crowded tables. Louis followed her gaze, noting the combinations of each diner. They were the only herbivore and carnivore sitting together on this floor. No one was giving them any odd looks, but he suddenly felt an odd weight over his head, like his antlers had turned to iron.

"Everyone was very kind," she said. "Gave us free samples and everything. We probably showed up on a few Tweeter feeds with tacky little hearts pasted around us. Cherryton and the drama club kept telling us about segregation and discrimination, but I didn't really notice it until that day."

"That's because you're a sheltered schoolgirl," he said matter-of-factly. "Everyone comes to terms with the realities of discrimination sooner or later."

"Maybe. But I don't know how much longer it would have taken me, if I hadn't fallen in love with you."

He winced. There was that turn of phrase again, direct as a sledgehammer. But she didn't even react to him. She curled the knuckles of one hand against her chin, idly toying with her fork in the other.

"So yeah, I got a little frustrated. I yelled at a news crew. I felt better by the time I went to bed. But you know, thinking back to that day, the two of us sitting at that café and looking at all the same-species couples around us...there was a moment when I might have ripped out all their throats, if I could."

She looked at him then, with that same coy smile. Louis had to resist the urge to back his chair away.

"It's probably just how I remember it. I don't think I really felt that way when we were there. But God, it pisses me off sometimes. Those happy couples and their easy, superficial love. It reminds me of how I felt for Legosi, at first."

“You’re being ridiculous,” he said. “Same-species relationships aren’t inherently shallow.”

“No. But they’re easier, aren’t they? And that can blind you. If Legosi had actually returned my feelings, I’d still be oblivious to all these things.” She sighed again, wistfully. “Good thing he’s so dense.”

“That’s debatable. That it’s a good thing, I mean. I can’t argue with the denseness.”

“But he has a point in some ways. Els told me he always liked tragedies best. Those ugly feelings and unhappy endings...I don’t think you can really understand the world unless you open yourself up to them.” She giggled. “We’re getting pretty philosophical here.”

“We are,” he said, smiling.

“Do you ever talk like this with your fiancée?”

His smile disappeared. He’d stepped into the beartrap.

“I’ve said before that my relationship with her is none of your business,” he said. He should have ended it there, but his indignation grabbed his tongue and made it add, “And no, we don’t feel the need to discuss such childish subjects.”

“You don’t, huh.” She tilted her head. “An arranged marriage with another wealthy deer. It sounds very *easy*.”

“It’s not.”

“But I thought you had a good relationship with her?”

He waved at a nearby waitress. “Excuse me, could we have the check?”

“You seem to get flustered a lot whenever we talk. It’s pretty strange that a sheltered schoolgirl like me can trip you up like this.”

“I’d be more than happy to leave you alone,” he said, through grit teeth. “I don’t need to know what’s going on at Cherryton *that* badly.”

“I think you do. They’re still your friends, after all.” There was a touch of genuine sadness in those eyes now. “I’m okay if you don’t want to be with me, Louis. I just wish you’d stop trying so hard to be lonely.”

He muttered under his breath as the smiling waitress brought their check. He paid in cash and got up so fast his chair almost fell over. “I’m off. We spent too much time here anyway.”

“Louis.”

“What?”

She looked up at him, running her claw along the table as if tracing an unseen script. “I was serious about the black market. Please don’t get mixed up in that stuff again.”

“You haven’t told Haru about my time there, have you?”

“No. But I worry.”

“You don’t need to. Legosi’s the one with the self-destructive streak. I know better.” He shrugged on his coat. “Good luck with the club. And maybe learn to keep that nose out of other animals’ affairs.”

He went down the stairs, wincing a little every time his prosthetic leg touched the floor, and stepped outside. The air hit his nose like a dishrag. The threads of blue overhead were already closing up. He started to walk off, then glanced back at the window. Through the pavement’s reflection, he imagined Juno looking back at him with that uneasy expression, a mix of pity and desire.

It was that carnivore way of thinking. He’d gotten used to the lions’ open displays of emotion – Free joyously hugging him moments after holding him up at gunpoint – but Legosi’s total lack of a mental filter and occasional bizarre flashes of insight still threw him off, and Juno had that plus a thimbleful of common sense. It was a fearsome combo. He was much too used to herbivores’ careful, mannered way of conversation.

Though that didn’t change the fact that he and Azuki had barely spoken since the hotel room. He really needed to fix that soon, before his father asked any more pointed questions about his sexuality.

He focused on these things, the appointments and errands he had to run, mostly so that he didn’t have to think about the Shishigumi. And he succeeded, until everything in the black market completely went to hell.

* * *

The drizzle had started again by the time Legosi got off work. He ate the leftover udon he’d brought home and laid down in his six-mat room, listening to the moan of the pipes, the chatter of Seibun’s TV, Eugen’s music downstairs (he was big into classical piano, surprisingly). The stain in the ceiling above his bed warped and swam. In his first few weeks here, he’d watched that stain and imagined all the ways Haru would come to see him. Everything, but the most obvious.

There was a knock at his door. He sprang to his feet and almost sprinted into the wall in his eagerness to answer, but then stopped, composed himself, and opened it. On the other side, standing at approximately waist-height, not counting the ears, was Haru.

She smiled. “Hey, you.”

“Hi,” he said. His tail was already wagging.

He’d called her that morning and summarized his conversation with Louis, carefully sidestepping any mention of the Shishigumi or the money he’d sent to them – Legosi might have a dead short between his brain and his mouth but even he knew that telling Haru he’d sent fifteen million yen to the lions would end very badly for him. She’d taken the news

stoically, and then suggested coming over that night. He'd agreed immediately and then watched the clock all day long.

She was lying beside him now, the same way they'd been the night before his third, and final, failed attempt to catch Melon. When the hybrid had duped him into vilifying himself in front of a whole boulevard full of other animals, he'd fled to Cherryton and waited for the whiteness to grow out of his fur, planning to continue his pursuit as soon as he was able. But he'd run out of chances. Melon died before he even stepped off campus, and his predatorial offense remained, a wall between himself and Haru, forged of black ink. They'd been nervous and fumbling in each other's company since then, both of them wondering how much longer this could go on. How long they could endure it.

Haru laced her hands across her chest and sighed. The space heater droned on, cocooning them in its canned warmth.

"So how was Louis?" she asked.

"He was... Louis."

"Ah, yes. Surely we've all been a little *Louis* from time to time." She shook her head. "Sometimes I worry about how he's doing at college. He's so aloof. It's hard for him to make friends."

"I think he's doing okay."

"Coming from you that makes me feel better." She laid a hand on his own. He trembled a little at her touch, like it was full of latent static. "So what are you going to do? Will you move?"

"I don't want to. I don't think you do, either."

"Not really."

"That's what I said to him. You've got your school, your family..."

"It's not just that. I've kind of accepted the fact that I'm never going to be safe no matter where I go. I mean, my history professor turned out to be a serial killer and I'm *pretty* sure he was planning to eat me. Eventually you just have to take life as it comes."

After Melon's death, Haru had noticed her professor's sudden absence and put two and two together. Legosi had almost literally hit the roof when she'd told him that little anecdote over the phone; he'd been on his break at work and his bewildered coworkers had seen him leap off his chair. Any lingering sympathy he'd had for Melon had disappeared in that instant.

"A year ago, I never would've imagined myself living like this," he said. "But I made it all the way here, by my own choice. I don't just want to run away from this life. I want to protect it."

"Defend your territory, huh. That's a very carnivore way of thinking."

Haru rolled over and climbed on top of him and his body went rigid as a steel girder. She knelt on his chest and looked down at him, her smile gentle, eyes half-lidded. The flyspecked lightbulb overhead formed a dim halo in the space between her ears.

“Most herbivores try to run,” she said. “Small ones especially. If we’re backed into a corner, then all we can really do is jump down our predator’s throat...and hope they choke on us.”

She reached out with her small hand and rubbed it on Legosi’s mouth, across the contours of his fangs beneath. He couldn’t move. He’d only fling her off if he tried. He was paralyzed by her affection.

“You know, I’m home alone this week?” she said.

“Mm?”

“My parents and my siblings are visiting relatives. I’ve got school, so I’m house-sitting.”

“Mhm?”

She ran her fingers through the tufts of his cheeks, bent low to his ear, breathed in his scent. “We’d have the place all to ourselves...”

He unstuck his jaw. “Can’t. Sorry. I’m. Can’t.”

The stroking stopped. He felt her touch withdraw.

“Right,” she said. “Sorry.”

But she still wouldn’t get off him. She laid her hands in her lap and bowed her head, as though his chest had become her prayer mat. Eugen’s music tinkled away downstairs. He badly wanted it to shut up.

“It was a stupid idea anyway,” she said. “All my neighbors would see you coming in. They’d probably call the police.”

“I’m going to fix this, Haru. I promise.”

“I hope so. It’s been over a year since we met. I want you to finally know who I am.”

“But I do-”

She shook her head again, her ears waving like sea-grass. “No. You don’t really know me until you’ve gotten to know that part of me. I want to get closer than this.” She pressed her hand against his heart. “I want you to stop being afraid to touch me. Like you think the cops’ll bust down the door if we kiss.”

“It’s not just that,” he said, and took her hand – his paw enclosed her entire forearm.

“Everyone wants us to think we’re wrong, together. That mark on my record is the only proof they have. If I take that away, they’ve got nothing.”

“Why should you care so much what they think?” she asked. He felt his grip start to tighten and let go before he could hurt her.

“Because sometimes I’m scared that I agree with them,” he said. “I’m scared of what I can do. To you.”

“Idiot.” She lay on her stomach, sprawled on the geography of him. “You’re the gentlest animal I know.”

“You’re a liar.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I ripped out another animal’s throat in front of you.”

“You sure did,” she said. “Not to mention what happened with Bill, and Riz, and God only knows what else you got up to in the black market. But every day I see animals hurting each other in the stupidest, most casual ways. Did I ever tell you about the rabbit in my school who was showing off her lion boyfriend? She ended up in the hospital the same day, because he nearly tore her face off when they kissed. They never worried about hurting one another, or getting hurt. But you do. Always.” She smiled again – fainter, more melancholy, but it was there. “Don’t get me wrong, it drives me nuts sometimes. But I’m never going to be scared around you.”

Legosi kept his gaze on the stain. He could feel the rapid tempo of her heartbeat through their clothes. After a long moment, he wrapped his arms around her, pressed her deeper into him. She smelled like laundry, lettuce leaves, the sooty rain outside.

“You make me want to be better,” he said.

“I just hope you realize when you’re good enough,” said Haru. “Legosi, this’ll be it, right? Once your record’s clear, there’s no more excuses?”

“No more excuses.”

“Okay.” She curled into his embrace. “Can I stay tonight? The weather sucks. And it’s nice and toasty in here.”

“Sure.” He didn’t have any tomato juice. No chance of repeating the incident from last time.

He held her there as her breathing slowed. In his grip, he was very aware of her terrible fragility. Sometimes he still flashed back on that day in drama club – Tao accidentally, casually dismembering Kibi, the incident that had finally set him against Riz and kicked off all the misfortune to follow. Around Haru his claws always seemed sharper, his fur scraggly, his gums aching with phantom fangs. Like the hideous thing that had tried to eat her when they’d first met. He was always running from that creature inside himself, never getting far enough away.

His thoughts chased and nipped each other until Haru’s heartbeat and the patter of rain against his apartment lulled him as well. His eyelids fluttered, then closed. Against the

windowpane, the raindrops ran down, consuming each other, growing fat.

* * *

She awoke in dripping dark.

The apartments in the black market were no more hospitable than the rest of the district – cramped, splintery, tarpaper-clad labyrinths through which their residents scuttled like deranged and lonesome ants in a long-drowned hill. Many of them were lifers, too sketchy or too poor to live anywhere else, and they endured the leaks, the drafts, and their slumlords’ demands with sullen stoicism. At night the streets outside were a din of shopkeepers’ cries and gunfire. The air always carried a maddening undernote of raw meat.

In this bedroom, even smaller than Legosi’s own dwelling in the Hidden Condo, was a female coyote. She needed no alarm to rise; habit had burned her sleep patterns deep into the folds of her brain. She sat without light and waited for her night vision to show her the shapes of things. She was thin, her sandy fur patchy in places, and one of her ears was missing all the way down to the scalp. The building around her creaked and moaned. Somewhere, the ceiling was leaking, its pitter-pat like a ticking clock. She rose, cleaned herself, got dressed.

The apartment was sparsely furnished, its hallways so narrow that even with her slight frame she had to watch her step. No picture frames or potted plants. It was like a haunted house where the ghosts hadn’t yet moved in. There was one door that was seldom opened. She opened it now.

The swollen wood scraped across the doorframe with a pained noise and opened into another tiny bedroom. The air in here was stale enough to burn her throat. She stepped across a floor so thick with dust it powdered the bottoms of her shoes and sat down on the bare mattress, springs squealing under her weight. She looked at the featureless wall across from her and waited. The sounds of the apartment and the city outside were muffled and flattened by her lost ear, everything in monoaural. She stayed there for a long time, expressionless.

Eventually, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She took it out and raised it to her good ear, still watching the wall. She didn’t speak. For a few seconds, only the hiss of dead air emerged from the speaker. Then:

“Karlov tells me you’re in.”

The voice was so rusted and guttural that it sounded like it could have come from no living throat, just senseless noise torturing itself into these syllables. It made the side of her head throb.

“Are you in?” it asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“I’ll send you a time and place. Be there. We’ll talk.”

The phone went dead. She put it back and once again went still. She stayed there for so long that anyone looking would have thought she'd died there, her upright corpse growing out from the filthy mattress like a stalactite. But she did rise eventually, and left, closing the door behind her. She returned to her room and pulled a shawl over her head that rested unevenly on her mangled ears. Then she glided across the apartment, a shadow among darker shadows, and opened the door and went to work.

In the abandoned bedroom, something was written on the floor just in front of the entrance – gouged into the planks, the darkness pooling in the letters' shapes. It read: *I can't get used to it.*

The Moon Smells Like a Cherry Bomb

Legosi saw Haru off in the morning. He'd wanted to give her a goodbye kiss, he'd been psyching himself up for it all last night, but when she stood outside his doorway and smiled and waved, the threshold between the two of them was suddenly a scorched and untraversable badland. He'd settled for waving back, and then shut the door and quietly banged his head against the wall for a minute or so afterward.

Work was uneventful. The dismal mood that had tinged Bebebe's clientele two days ago was already starting to lift; he kept his ear out as he waited tables and overheard no mention of flayed foxes. The sky overhead darkened from slate to coal as the day wore on. In the late afternoon, when the number of customers began to dwindle, Sunaga poked his head out from the manager's office.

"Legosi! Are you busy?"

"Just a minute, sir!" He knelt down and set a teacup-sized bowl in front of a bespectacled shrew. "Karē udon, extra spice. Please enjoy. Let us know if you need more water."

"See me in the kitchen when you're finished, please!"

Legosi followed Sunaga into the back and looked around in puzzlement. The kitchen was mostly running the same as ever – a disgruntled Thomas was still chained to the sink – but all of the carnivore waiters were also gathered here, looking as confused as he was. Sunaga brandished a slip of paper at them all.

"Okay, everyone! We have a delivery to make, wakame udon, extra-large. Who wants to handle it?"

They all glanced at each other. This was not usual. When Sunaga wanted a delivery made, he didn't ask for volunteers; he just dropped it in someone's lap and then gave them his patented owl stinkeye if they complained. Thomas stepped away from the dishes and plucked the order from Sunaga's wing, read, and then reeled back like the paper had squirted acid in his face.

"What the hell? Boss, this is right on the black market's border. It's closer than where Legosi lives!"

"How much closer?" Legosi asked.

"You literally turn the corner and you're smack at the entrance. And someone wants food delivered there?" Thomas handed the slip back to Sunaga. "Look, I know the store's motto and all, but that place has gotten *spooky* lately. I haven't gone in weeks. Even Mika's been staying away!"

"I'm not asking you to go in," Sunaga protested. "These animals are old friends. One of them's been feeling ill. This is a special favor to them."

“Makes sense,” Mika said, tying up the package. “This order’s enough to feed someone for a few days.”

“Just pop in there and head back. I know the market’s been tumultuous lately, but no one’s going to bother someone delivering food. I’ll even throw in a little bonus, how’s that sound?” He looked at them beseechingly. “Please, everyone. It would mean a lot to me.”

Legosi raised his hand. “I’ll go.”

Everyone turned to him, mouths slightly open. Then Sunaga rushed up, holding the order. It was difficult for one to beam with a beak, but he managed it.

“My boy! And for someone your size the trip shouldn’t be an issue at all! It’s a bit far, but you can bike over there no problem.”

“Yessir.”

“Don’t forget to take a bike lock with you. And try to get back before dark.”

“Yessir.”

“The big bad wolf, taking one for the team,” Donson said.

“Be careful, Legosi,” Mika said. “And don’t go into the market!”

“Why would I?” he said innocently.

Ten minutes later he was pedaling down the road with the order sloshing on his back. It was misting against today, so that Legosi felt himself becoming steadily more sodden as he rode down the darkening streets. In his head he was trying to block out Louis’ shouting voice and having only marginal success. His job was his job, and he had more experience with the dangers of the black market than anyone else in the shop, even if his co-workers didn’t know it. Why shouldn’t he be the one to make the delivery?

Because no one else in that shop went around pissing off every gangster in the city, his inner Louis countered. Legosi frowned. It wasn’t fair that the imaginary one was good at arguing, too.

He smelled it on the wind – the tantalizing alkalinity of raw meat. He was well past his own cravings but that aroma still dredged up something dark in him, planting its hooks in his primordial brain. He doubted that it would ever leave him. The neon corona of the market’s main road oozed gaudy light from a block away, and he approached it cautiously, glancing at the address Sunaga had given him.

It turned out to be one of the nearby rowhouses – buildings with scarred paint and barred windows, huddled together as if for warmth. He got off his bike, chained and locked it to a nearby lightpost, triple-checked the address, and went to the rather large front door of one particular house. He tucked the package under his arm and knocked.

“Excuse me?” he called. “Delivery from udon shop Bebebe!”

He could feel the thump of approaching footsteps. He took a cautious step back from the door, pulled his hatbrim low. The handle turned. The door creaked open.

“Good evening,” he said, offering the food. “Your order.”

A massive pair of brown-furred hands emerged from the inner darkness. Darkness that was, Legosi realized, quite nice-smelling. A bit floral, though with an underlying note of ammonia. Then the customer emerged fully, and Legosi found himself face-to-face with Riz.

For a moment Legosi forgot how to breathe. Then he realized – this wasn’t his former classmate. It was a brown bear, sure enough, but smaller, older, the fur around its nose powdering gray. And when it spoke, the voice was husky and deep enough to make his ribs rattle, but also unmistakably female.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “And you got here so quickly!”

“I. Er. Yes, it’s no problem.”

From inside the house came a pained, tectonic moan. It had an inquisitive note. The bear turned to it.

“It’s Bebebe, dear. With your udon!”

Another moan, this one grateful.

“My husband’s a little under the weather,” she said, looking back to Legosi. “Stomach virus, poor thing. Sunaga’s cooking is just what he needs to knock it out for good.”

Had Legosi seen bear customers in the shop before? He must have. The place was always mobbed.

“I’d invite you in for tea or something,” she went on, “but I wouldn’t want you catching whatever he has.”

He nodded so hard his hat almost fell off. “It’s fine. I need to be getting back, anyway. I hope your husband feels better.”

“Thank you again.” She held out a sheaf of bills. “Here you go. And there’s a little something extra there, for your trouble. I know this can be a rough neighborhood. More so than ever, lately.”

He nodded, took the money, and then asked, “Have you been doing okay? I mean...with everything going on?”

He wasn’t sure why he asked it. Maybe part of him was still rattled by the resemblance to Riz – he’d often thought of how he was doing, the only actual info being from Juno, who’d told him that Riz had been packed off to juvie and then disappeared into anonymity. But the female bear just snorted.

“We’re large-scale carnivores, dear. We don’t frighten easily. Though I can’t say the same for our neighbors.” She looked fretfully in the direction of the black market. “Between you and me, we’re on close terms with some of the shopkeepers there, and it’s become terribly tense. I’d suggest you steer clear for the time being.”

“I don’t eat meat,” he said, a little too fast. “But I don’t...what I meant to say is, there’s nothing wrong with animals who-”

“No need to get so flustered. Neither of us have touched the stuff in ages. It gives my husband indigestion these days.” She patted the package under her arm, as if soothing a child. “But I can’t begrudge anyone for going to that place. It’s only natural that animals want to eat good food.”

“Let me know if I can help. With delivering udon, I mean. If you need more.”

“Oh, you are such a sweetheart. Sunaga always did know how to pick them. But we’ll be fine, don’t worry.” She stepped back into the house. “Have a good evening, mister...?”

“Legosi.”

“Legosi. I think we’ll ask for you next time we stop by Bebebe.”

“Sure. I’ll look forward to it.”

She gave him one final nod and closed the door. He counted the money she’d handed him and his eyes widened. She had tipped almost the full cost of the order itself. That was a nice bonus.

Yes, it’s not like you have five million yen sitting in your bank account or anything, his inner Louis said.

If you keep behaving like this then I won’t bring you with me again, Legosi retorted.

He looked down the street. It was almost time for supper, and the black market was starting to bustle – even now, with the shadows of recent crises hanging over it. He took another whiff of the bloody delights inside and his stomach growled. Any more of this and he’d start to drool. He really needed to get back to the shop.

One more. For old time’s sake. He breathed deep – and then stopped.

Legosi shuddered and clapped his hands over his nose. A few animals passing him on the way to the market gave him an odd look, but then shrugged and continued on. He lowered his hands and smelled it again. It was still there, even under the meat, under the newcomers’ scent-trails.

Legosi’s nose was extremely sensitive, and if he’d ever been called to describe the things he smelled then words would probably fail him. He spent every day wandering through a miasmic spectrum of scents that often defied language entirely, but this one was unfamiliar. It was somehow *slippery*, like old cooking grease, with a distinct aspirin bitterness; it slithered

down his nasal passages and lodged in it like a tapeworm. Subtle though it was, it made him want to retch. And it was coming from inside the black market.

He thought of the fox heads, lined up like macabre trophies. Louis hunched over his empty udon bowl, whispering to him of a new menace in the market. Strange sights, strange smells. Could this scent be one of them, he thought? Had it been ferried into the street by whoever was intent on stirring up trouble?

The scent had hooked him. He could feel it pulling him forward. He glanced back at his bike, which stood under the lamppost dewed with mist. He stared at it as if it would offer him reasons to just ignore this and ride off. Being a bike, it did not.

Legosi took off his hat, exposing his scars. He went down the road and into the market.

The vendors' hawking voices all hit him at once. There was a faint note of desperation in their cries; business hadn't been doing so great after recent events. He ignored them and followed the smell, though he could see them beckon and wave at the corner of his eye.

"Evening to you, big fella! Got some venison in, so fresh it's practically still breathing!"

"I see you drooling, friend. Ten percent off for the hungry boy. No, fifteen!"

"Hey, I recognize that uniform! Get yourself a little dinner. Tell Sunaga I said hi!"

He stepped off the thoroughfare, into the tangled side alleys. This was not a good place to linger, but Legosi's height and scarred eye were enough to convince the average mugger that he was more trouble than he was worth. That slick and bitter scent grew stronger. He traced it intently, through the reeking bouquet of trash and rain-soaked cloth that pervaded this part of the city. At one point he almost tripped over a raincoat-clad beggar curled up at the side of the road, smoking a pipe whose own gasoline aroma hit him like a pair of brass knuckles. He muttered an apology and stepped away, waiting for his nose to recover.

The last traces of gray bled out of the sky as he continued. The only light now came through the smoky windows and distant signs overhead. Legosi's night vision fuzzed the edges of everything, rendered the world dreamlike. He emerged from the alley and into one of the side markets, a little square lit by flickering bulbs strung along its upper reaches. The stalls here were empty, the seats unmanned – Legosi could see little hooks dangling from one stall that had probably been used to bear up limbs or small herbivores for sale. There were also two animals there, a jaguar and an opossum, in nondescript and shapeless clothes. The jaguar was bent under the stall, hands at work. The smell was coming from there.

They hadn't noticed him. Legosi crept around the square's outer edge, peering through the dark. Then the possum's head perked up. He glanced over his shoulder, tapped the jaguar's arm. The jaguar turned and stood. Their gazes nailed Legosi to the spot.

"Er. Hello," he said. "I think I got turned around."

They didn't answer. Beneath the stall, Legosi saw what appeared to be a long, thin black brick. Its center bristled with wires like it was in the grip of some bizarre spider. Legosi was

now very aware of how quiet it was back here. How empty.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

The two animals glanced at each other. Then, as one, they reached into their coats.

Legosi turned on his heel and bolted. Gunshots cracked the air and though he was already well down another side road he felt the wind of their passing, would have sworn that one bullet went right through the billows of his uniform. He skidded to a halt and down a perpendicular alley and then halted, faced with a leering wall of pitted stone. The dead end was piled high with discarded trash. He could hear approaching footsteps.

Legosi looked at the adjacent wall, where a rusted drainpipe snaked around the barred and blinded windows. He cracked his knuckles. He still remembered his internship with Gouhin.

He took a deep breath and latched onto the drainpipe, shimmying up its length as it groaned and buckled under his weight. He swung off it before it collapsed entirely and grabbed onto a set of window-bars, legs dangling free, then clambered back to the alleyway mouth and looked down. The jaguar was moving to his former position at a brisk walk, pistol in hand. Legosi was about two stories above. He watched the jaguar approach and prayed that he wouldn't look up. He craned his head around the corner of the alley; the mist was making visibility even poorer, but he couldn't see the possum back there anymore.

The jaguar stepped into the alley with gun raised. Legosi watched him pause, saw the moment of confusion in his posture. He gripped the window-bars and then tensed, swung, and released, dropping to the pavement behind the jaguar like a sandbag, and before he could turn around Legosi palmed the side of his head and smashed it into the wall hard enough to divot the rock. The jaguar shuddered once, and then went limp, crumpling to the ground. Legosi kicked the pistol away for good measure.

“I really don't like guns,” he announced, to no one in particular.

He loped back to the square. That ominous black brick was still there, still wired; he didn't dare touch it. He sniffed around it and picked up the possum's bedraggled scent; he'd taken off in the opposite direction, either to get backup or just lie low. Legosi's claws scored the cobblestones. He couldn't have gotten far.

Down this road, turn, turn again, duck under hanging laundry, jump over this fallen trashcan and its entrails of meat-scrap and discarded product, and there was the possum's hunched and ghostly silhouette, on its way back to the market's main road. Legosi too was bent low, almost running on all fours, and his keyed-up senses could hear the rapid raindrop patter of the possum's heartbeat, how it suddenly sped up as Legosi closed in. The possum whirled around, pistol raised, but Legosi seized his wrist and twisted and the gun clattered to the ground, and with his other hand Legosi grabbed him by the throat and raised him high, slamming him into the wall. Then it was just the two of them, and the sighing of the wind through the market's back alleys.

The both of them were breathing hard. This road was a narrow cut through what could charitably be called the district's residential area; there was barely any light here at all.

Behind Legosi was a recessed doorway. He couldn't sense anyone on the other side. It was as if the whole neighborhood had gone vacant, save for the two of them.

The possum smirked down at him. He barely came up to Legosi's bellybutton and his limbs were scrawny even for one of his type. There was no way he'd be able to get free. But that face asked a very clear, obvious question: *Now what?*

Legosi tried to look intimidating. "Who are you? Were you and that feline responsible for the bombings?"

No response.

"Give me answers. I don't want to hurt you."

The possum grinned wider. His needlelike teeth glinted in the murk. Legosi was now officially out of ideas. He frantically paged his inner Louis, but the deer's voice had left him. Then he realized – why bother with inner Louis when you could have the real thing?

Making sure not to loosen his grip, Legosi carefully took out his phone with his free hand. He groaned inwardly at the concerned texts he'd gotten from Sunaga, but ignored them and navigated to his contacts. He dialed, put the phone to his ear, and waited. It rang twice, then three times, and just when he was about to lose hope, the call went through.

"What is it, Legosi?"

"Don't be mad. I'm in the black market. I'm pretty sure I caught one of the bombers."

He'd expected shouting. But there was only the briefest of pauses before Louis calmly said, *"What's his species?"*

"Possum. And he was with a jaguar, too. Those aren't part of the Families, are they?"

"The Madaragumi might have some jaguars, but I don't know of any gangs in the city who'd take in scavenger species. Have you tried questioning him?"

"Yeah. He won't say anything. He's just smiling at me." Legosi glanced down the street. He didn't know if it was just his imagination, but he felt eyes on him, unseen gazes crawling like ants.

"I doubt you can get him out of there without being noticed. The police or the Shishigumi wouldn't make it in time...wait. Legosi, what does he smell like?"

"He smells like possum. He's a possum."

"Is that all?"

Legosi blinked, then looked up at his captive. He tightened his hold on the possum's throat and then darted his nose in and breathed deep. He was downright rancid, his fur spotted with blood from feasting ticks, but there were other scents mixed in, out of place.

“I can smell...lamb. Chicken.” He blinked again and growled the next word. “Rabbit.”

“Those are from his deliveries,” Louis said. His voice was tense as a coiled spring. “He’s one of the goddamn Butchers.”

“What? But you said that the Butchers were being targeted by the bombings.” He looked at the possum imploringly. “Why won’t you *talk*?”

“I don’t understand it myself but the facts are the facts. You need to knock him out and leave him someplace he’ll be found. I’ll get the lions in there, once they grab him they’ll get whatever information that we-”

“Legosi, *get back!*”

The shout came from somewhere overhead, tinny and nasal but with such desperate urgency that Legosi dropped his captive and staggered away as though he’d been struck. An instant later the air cracked and he again felt that zipping puff of wind, the bullet passing so close to his snout that for a horrible moment he thought the tip of it had been sheared clean off. His phone fell from his hand as he lurched into the recess across the street, digging his shoulderblades against the door. The possum was still there, on his knees and rubbing his neck, and then the gun sounded off three more times and he jerked as the pavement beneath him splattered red. He caught bullets in the torso, throat and head and died before he fell over, still smiling. In the silence that followed, Legosi could hear Louis through the phone’s speaker, shouting his name.

“You’re clear,” said the voice from above. “They ran off!”

Legosi looked up and saw a row of little round-eared heads poking up from the rain-gutter, five in all. They rose up and revealed themselves to be rats, wearing dapper black suits. All of them were glaring down at him like he was a bit of muck on their tiny little shoes.

“Long time no see,” one of them said dryly.

“What are you doing here, you dumb mutt?!” another one shouted. “Didn’t you learn your lesson about sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong?”

Now he remembered where he’d seen this before. That surreal elevator ride to a penthouse high above the city, a night that had ended with him ripping out his own teeth.

“Are you working for Yafya?” he asked them. “Is he here?”

“He will be,” said one of the Cornered Rats. “Especially after this shitshow you just stirred up. We’ve been scoping out this place ever since the last explosion. You’re lucky a bunch of us were close enough to hear the gunfire.”

“Listen, I think the Butchers are the ones setting up the bombs. I smelled-”

“Yeah, we heard. We’ll tell Yafya, don’t worry.”

“What about the bomb? It’s still in the square!” Legosi winced as another gunshot sounded off in the distance.

“Which way?” the rat asked, and Legosi pointed the way he’d come. “Alright, we’ll handle it. Now get out of here and go home. Leave the rest to the Beastar!”

The rats scurried off. Legosi rubbed his nose and felt his heart pound. Whoever had tried to plug him just then had been a crack shot; he would have been hit square in the side of his head if it hadn’t been for that warning. He looked down and watched the possum’s spreading blood reach out to his phone.

His phone. Louis!

He snatched it up and put it to his ear again. “Louis, are you there? I’m alright!”

The line was still open but for a minute he only heard the hiss of dead air. When Louis did speak his voice was much hoarser, oddly jerky, like he was hand-crafting every syllable before letting it out into the world.

“Are you hurt? Anywhere? I heard gunshots.”

“Someone tried to shoot me, yeah. The Butcher I caught is dead. But Yafya’s rats warned me.”

“Yafya’s-”

“-rats, yes. The Beastar. He has rats working for him. They warned me.”

“Yes. You said. Okay. I’m glad you’re safe. Now, next order of business.” Louis took a steadying breath. *“What the hell are you doing in the black market?!”*

Legosi flinched and pulled the phone away. “I’m sorry.”

“I want an explanation, not an apology. I want it now, Legosi!”

“I had a delivery close by. For work. And I smelled something weird. It turned out to be the bomb they were setting up.”

“And you smelled that from outside the market?” For a moment, Louis’ incredulity blunted his anger. *“That nose of yours is absurd.”*

“I didn’t know what it was at first. Just that it was strange. And with everything you told me, about all the terrible things happening here...I wanted to help. Help you.”

“I told you about those things so that you’d stay away, you idiot. Do you have any idea what sort of trouble you’re getting yourself into? This isn’t like what happened with Riz or Melon. They only attacked you when you tried to come after them first. But these animals will hunt you down if they think you’re a threat. You can’t fight all of them!”

“I’m sorry. I was trying to help.”

“Yes, you said.” His rage was ebbing away, little by little. “The silver lining is that you probably did. If it turns out the Butchers are rigging up these bombs...it’s not good, not at all, but it’s still valuable information. I’ll let Free know and he’ll pass it along to the other Families. If the Beastar really is on the move, then between him and the gangs clamping down we might finally see an end to all this insanity.”

“What should I do? Besides go home. I’m going home, don’t worry.” He remembered something, and felt a deep surge of dread. “After I get back to work. I really hope the shop hasn’t closed yet.”

“Don’t linger. Unlike the Families, the Butchers don’t have any clout outside the black market and I’m pretty sure they don’t know where you live. As long as you stay far, far away you should be safe. But if you see anything strange, or even think you do, call me immediately. I’ll buy you a new apartment myself if it gets you out of that place.”

“Oh. Um. Thank you?”

“Save your thanks. If you want to show your gratitude so much, then quit acting suicidal. I need to go. After all that shouting I just did, my butler is probably listening at my door.”

“Okay,” he said. “Good night, Louis.”

“Just get out. Now.” A pause. “And I’m grateful. You did help. But it’s more important to me that you stay safe, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight, Legosi.”

Louis hung up. In the time it had taken to finish this call, Legosi had received two more messages from Bebebe. He quickly texted that he was on his way back and then turned off his phone and shoved it in his pocket. Now it was just him and the corpse. Appropriately, the street was still empty as a tomb.

He navigated through the alleys once more, following the smell of raw meat until he made it back to the now-blinding lights of the main road. The place had become crowded enough so that he had to elbow his way back to the entrance. Even if these animals had heard the gunshots, it was widely accepted as just one of the risks you had to deal with when shopping here. He wondered how busy it would be if that bomb had gone off.

He returned to his bike, which was still chained to the lamppost. Small mercies. Legosi undid the lock and pedaled away, thinking up alibis for Sunaga. From the black market’s crevices and dark, dripping spaces, unseen eyes watched him leave.

* * *

The Shishigumi’s main office wasn’t doing any better than the lions themselves. During his tenure as their leader, Melon had defaced the “Lion” kanji emblazoned on the wall with his name, and Legosi had shattered the main window during his final capture attempt. Now the

graffiti was sloppily painted over, the window was boarded up and let through the miserable chill outside, and what's more, the coffee table and the couch were both broken, due to the latter being used to smash the former into splinters. The furniture had been a casualty of Free's meeting with Louis two months ago. No one liked to talk about it.

Free kept holding meetings in here anyway, either out of stubbornness or plain masochism. He sat behind the desk now, beneath the slashes of paint blacking out Melon's name. It was the middle of the night and the office's only illumination came from the desk lamp, stranding him in its isle of light. The other lions stood roughly around the busted table. Free leaned back in his chair, pinched the skin between his eyes.

"I fucking called it," he said.

"You did," Miguel agreed solemnly.

"Those Butcher bastards. What the hell's gotten into them?"

"It does make some kind of sense," Dope said. "No clue where they got the explosives or the brains to set them up, but they'd know better than anyone where and when to rig the market to blow."

"Louis said that Legosi figured this out?" Jimma asked. "What was the point of that payoff if he was going to come here anyway?"

"The universe doesn't work right around that wolf. Remember when we tied him to a chair and kicked him into the sea, and the sea *spat him back out*? I ain't gonna try to question it." Free leaned forward again, propped his elbows on the table. "Honestly, I'm just glad we didn't make an enemy of him. He's a moron, but shit gets caught up in his orbit. Him and Louis both."

"And now the Beastar is on the march," Hino said. "We're headed toward war, Free. Either with the police or each other."

"Don't I know it. And if it comes to that, then our chances ain't good. But we've gotta pass this info along. Holding onto it ourselves doesn't help anything."

"What's the plan?" asked Agata.

"We're gonna hit the bricks. Jimma, Sabu, you're with me. We need to track down someone from the other Families and tell 'em what Louis told us. From there it oughta find its way into Agrippa's ears."

"And Cruce?"

"You saw how he was at the meeting. He's useless. Might as well tie all his Silvervine into a noose and hang himself from it, the way he's gone." Free shook his head. "Agrippa pisses me off somethin' fierce, but he's the only one who can circle the wagons against the Butchers right now. As for you, Agata, take Dope and hit up the stalls, wherever you can find them. Don't tell them everything, just say they should keep a close eye on the Butchers' deliveries."

And let them know about the Beastar. If Yafya comes knocking, they need to be ready to close up shop and hide at a moment's notice. That horse spreads his shit around with a big fucking shovel."

"Our reputation's not doing so hot," Dope said. "You think they'll believe us?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Free said, and grinned. "But you're the most trustworthy-looking of us, what with those precious li'l babyfaces." Agata grumbled under his breath and Dope elbowed him sharply.

"What about me and Hino?" asked Miguel.

"Stay here. Keep an eye out. Now that the Butchers have been made, I don't know what they'll do. They might just keep making deliveries. Their way of saying, 'Yeah, we're blowing your asses up. The fuck you gonna do about it?' But I don't feel like leaving this place unguarded. It's wrecked enough as it is."

Hino nodded. "We'll set up vantage points."

"Maybe Yafya will actually do his job," Agata said hopefully. "If anyone can drag out Karlov, I bet he can."

"That'd be nice, wouldn't it?" Free said. "But don't count us out just yet. That damn dog thinks he's made himself essential to this place. I bet Agrippa's sweating bullets at the thought of losing our delivery network, no matter how much shit he's talked about them. But unlike him, we've got nothing left to lose."

Free rose up. His blind eye caught the pale lamplight and seemed to glow in the murky office, a marble-sized moon embedded in his face.

"The Shishigumi have had some real bad luck this year," he said. "Let's go spread it around."

* * *

The rats spread out. They scurried through the eaves and drainpipes of the black market, flitting around the district's upper reaches like wayward fragments of shadow. As Yafya's eyes and ears, the Cornered Rats had single-handedly adjusted the reputation of their entire species throughout the city; the sketchier parts of town were hard on their rat inhabitants, unconsciously viewing them as heralds of the Beastar himself. It was a bitter irony that the ones who actually worked for him were seldom seen at all.

Much as they hated to admit it, they hadn't had much luck before Legosi's encounter tonight. They numbered in the hundreds but Yafya had only sent a fraction of them to scope out the area, and while many of them had been here often, that didn't make it any easier to navigate – there were tunnels and crannies and places where the rooftops sagged into an impenetrable canopy, and the Butchers, already anonymous among the throngs of lurking animals in this place, could disappear easily. They'd disabled the bomb that Legosi had found (if there was one thing a rat could do with aplomb, it was nibble through wires), but even now the Butchers were eluding them. The possum's feline companion was also dead, his brains

spilling out through a single neat hole in his skull. The animal who'd shot him had almost definitely been the same one who'd almost plugged Legosi himself, and they'd only glimpsed it, a vague slumped shape at the end of the road, and somehow it had still gotten away.

The five rats who'd talked down to Legosi had followed the shooter's trail, lost it, found it again. They'd met up with more of their number and then divided into pairs, tracing its possible paths. If nothing else, they had the smell to go on. No idea what caused it, but the animal's scent was like sticking your nose into a backfiring tailpipe.

Two of the rats, Ton and Ralph, had tracked that stink to the back end of the district, just a stone's throw away from politer areas of the city. Ralph was slightly more heavyset than his companions but had twice the stamina to match, and Ton sported a distinct white circle over one eye and half a tail, thanks to a certain embarrassing incident with a windowsill some years back. They'd followed the trail to some derelict buildings at this borderland and then lost it. The two of them perched on the concrete sill outside two boarded-up windows, glaring at the neon smear below in frustration. The mist was turning back to rain.

"Ridiculous," Ton said, and spat. "It's like the bastard melted."

"The Butchers had to get stealthy from the beginning," said Ralph, who was the more reasonable of the two. "Otherwise the other Families would've clipped them years ago."

"Save us all a lot of trouble, if you ask me."

"Yeah, well, now they're blowing the place up."

"So what?" Ton said. "I'm with Yafya on this one. Let it burn. It's been nothing but trouble from the start."

"Try telling yourself that when all these animals try to get their fix elsewhere. The streets'll run red. You and I wouldn't even be a snack to some of them."

"Me, maybe." He poked Ralph's belly. "You, I'm not so sure."

"Ahh, screw you."

They leaned back against the boards, rubbing their paws. Neither of them could feel their fingers anymore.

"We should get back," said Ralph. "Join up with the others. Maybe they had more luck."

"I hope so. Yafya's going to be teed off if we couldn't find anything."

"We've got the bomb and a culprit. I'd say it's already been a pretty good night." Ralph pushed away from the window and stretched. "Oof, my back. I'm not cut out for this crap anymore."

"Wait. Hold on."

Ton raised his head, whiskers twitching. Ralph looked on, confused, and then he caught it too. That acrid bitterness.

Ton said, "Do you smell-"

The boards behind them exploded out in a cloud of splinters and clawed hands reached out and seized them both. The rats fought, screamed, their small voices barely reaching the streets below, and the hands pulled them into the dark. Then there was only the pitter-pat of rain, chittering its secrets into the city's hidden places.

Spitting Out the Devils

The following night, the black market went empty.

This wasn't like the Days of Depravity. On the night Melon had gone to his death, he'd strutted down the abandoned thoroughfare but still felt the pulse of life in the distance, the murmur of the crowd and the scent of their pelts. But tonight, the entire district seemed lifeless as the surface of the moon. The stalls were scrubbed clean until they smelled of nothing but disinfectant, all chairs and stools flipped over, every light and candle doused. Only the neon signs still buzzed, and they shone on windows with curtains and shutters drawn. In those apartments, some animals pulled aside their blinds just enough to look at the streets below. The ones on the ground floor barricaded themselves in their rooms and curled up in bed like they were waiting out a typhoon.

The moon's feeble grin glinted overhead, but just before midnight, the clouds devoured it again. Not long after, an outsider slipped through the front gate. It wore a dark longcoat that hung around its shape like a bundle of stormcloud; on its feet were white hi-tops that crunched the grit underfoot. Its wide, dark eyes swiveled wetly in their sockets. Those eyes saw every shuddering curtain and furtive shadow in the windows overhead. Nothing escaped the Beastar's gaze.

The Shishigumi had done their jobs well. On some level, the market-dwellers had been quietly expecting this ever since the first explosion, and Dope and Agata had spoken to them with a polite but firm desperation that they found very convincing. The rumors had swept through the district like a brushfire: Yafya is coming. Yafya is *unhappy*. Take shelter while you can.

And if there was any doubt to those rumors, it was banished at once from the minds of the animals who glimpsed him from overhead. Yafya's visits to this place were always treated as catastrophic, but there were two details about him tonight that made their throats close up. The first was his eyes, exposed and unbound. The second was his shoes. The horse typically wore red-and-white Springbok-brand sneakers when he was on patrol, but at the worst of times, he switched them out for pure white.

All the better to show off the blood.

* * *

The night before, around the same time an exhausted Legosi was boarding the train after feeding a series of weak excuses to his boss, Yafya was up in his penthouse. He was slowly ruining his carrot garden.

At this point in his life, he'd developed recipes for so many carrot-based dishes that he could probably write his own cookbook (and sometimes fantasized about doing so, once he finally retired), but when he was under stress he had a bad habit of tearing them out of the dirt and eating them raw. Nutritious, sure, but it made the garden unsightly, and after the third or fourth one his stomach would usually begin to plot revenge. But here he was, chowing down

like a starving rabbit, patrolling the garden beds and plucking the occasional stray bone out of the dirt. He hadn't been in a great state of mind since what had happened to the Inarigumi.

Things had been going steadily sideways in the city for weeks now, and he was seemingly the only one who could tell. Predation incidents were ticking up, first near the black market, and then moving further into the more upscale districts. His contacts within the meat trade, the ones who would occasionally let slip some gossip about when the next deal was going down and where, had all skipped town without a trace. Ominous rumblings from the Four Families. Unspoken tension everywhere you went. And to top it all off, Melon had been killed out of sheer happenstance. Yafya and the police had been hunting that mutant for ages. It was humiliating.

He clamped his teeth around the latest carrot and bit. The crunch set off reverberations all the way to the base of his skull. He chewed until it was paste, savoring the earthy flavor.

Through these mammoth windows could be seen the market district – barely, faintly, if you knew the way the light changed. It was a smear of dingy glitz amidst the city's cleanliness, a discoloration like a gangrenous wound. Yafya imagined it spreading tendrils of infection through the districts beyond. Would that he could burn it out, without the public raising a fuss.

At first, he'd considered the bombings a blessing in disguise. Finally, he'd thought, that cesspit had gotten so bad that it was dissolving in its own rot. But then the predation rate had started to increase, and the bombings had only stirred up the market's worst criminal elements like a nest of fire ants, and when the Inarigumi had perished, Yafya had realized that this problem wasn't going to solve itself. The market was self-destructing, to be sure, but in a way that guaranteed its violence would flood the streets beyond. The corruption had to be found and stomped out at the source, and since the police were too conspicuous, he'd sent the Cornered Rats to scout ahead, and spent the last couple of days staying up until dawn on a beta-carotene binge, waiting for news.

Behind him, the intercom buzzed. He paused in mid-chew and dashed over, hitting the TALK button.

"I'm here," he said.

"Yafya, sir. We've got some information, but it's not...th-that is to say, there's been a problem."

Yafya's eyes narrowed. His rats were usually paragons of professionalism. Any quaver in their voices meant a whole lot more turmoil was going on inside their heads.

"It's a difficult assignment," he said. "Some complications are to be expected. What happened?"

"Two of our scouts, sir – Ralph and Ton, do you remember?"

"Of course." He knew all their names.

“They were tracking one of the potential suspects. There was an incident a few hours ago that let us pick up a trail, but Ralph and Ton were...taken.”

Yafya’s lips peeled back from his teeth, still claggy with carrot. “Come again?”

“The suspect got the drop on them. They were captured. But they’re fine, they’re here in the lobby-”

The carrot dropped from Yafya’s other hand and his sigh of relief practically made his ribs buckle. “For God’s sake, you could have started with that!”

“I’m sorry, sir. We’re a little shaken up. These two want to give you the story themselves, but they’re not looking too good.”

“Send them up. And get a medic ready. Anything they need. I’ll be waiting at the elevator.”

He went to the penthouse foyer and watched the elevator’s numbers tick up, tapping his foot. When the doors dinged open, the two small and ragged shapes inside seemed reluctant to enter. Yafya got down on one knee, held out his hands.

“I’m glad to see you’re all right,” he said. “Come inside, please.”

Ralph and Ton limped in, bearing up each other’s weight. Their suit jackets were gone and their fur was clotted with gutter-mud, but they otherwise appeared to be unharmed. Their faces, however, disturbed him. Many of the rats were veteran players in the criminal underground and didn’t scare easily, but these two looked like they’d just peered into the slagpit of hell.

“We’re sorry, boss,” said Ralph. His voice cracked. “We weren’t careful enough.”

“You made it home safe, so I’d say you did just fine. What happened?”

“We found out who was rigging the bombs,” said Ton. “It’s the Butchers.”

Yafya showed no reaction for a second. Then he sat down on the marble floor, folding his legs under him, and took the rats in the palms of his hands. His long face hung over them like that of a patient god.

“Tell me everything,” he said. “Here and now.”

So they did. First they told him about their early, fruitless scouting attempts, the increased presence of the Madaragumi, the lions’ apparent absence. Then they mentioned the break in the case. The latest bombing attempt, discovered and foiled by Legosi the wolf. At the mention of that name, Yafya’s face somehow got even longer. Just thinking about that boy made his hip pain flare up again.

“We still don’t know what he was doing there,” said Ton.

“I’m not certain he could tell you if you asked him,” said Yafya. “That wolf is a curse. I’m just not sure on whom.”

“There was another animal who tried to shoot him when he questioning one of the bombers,” said Ralph. “He missed, but he killed both the other Butchers and got away. We tried to track him down, but he got to us first. Pulled us through a window.”

“It was so dark,” Ton whispered.

“Boss, listen. He only let us go ‘cause he wanted to send you a message. He’s calling you out.”

“Is he now,” Yafya said coolly.

“He said that if you want to meet the one behind the Butchers, then go to the square where the last bomb was defused, tomorrow at midnight. He’ll meet you there.” Ralph shook his head. “Listen, you’ve gotta let some of us come with you. If you get ambushed-”

“I *can’t* be ambushed,” he said. “Not with these eyes. And you’ve all taken on enough risk already. I’d be more than happy to finally meet the elusive Karlov myself.”

Ton lurched forward and grabbed Yafya’s thumb, his little claws digging in hard enough to hurt. Yafya looked down at him, puzzled, and then almost shook him off. The rat’s face was so pinched and contorted that it no longer looked living, more like fur stretched over waxwork.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “We think he meant *himself*. And this animal, he isn’t Karlov. I don’t know what he is.”

* * *

The rats had given him directions to the rendezvous point. He huffed steam as he walked into the black market’s depths. No one was around. He’d heard about the Butchers’ capacity for stealth, but his 350° vision didn’t pick up the least twitch beyond the gawking animals above. Even the rain had quieted.

He arrived in the square. The stalls here were unchanged since Legosi had stumbled over them – their owners were understandably reluctant to restart business after finding out this spot had nearly been blown to kingdom come. Of course, less trade meant hungrier animals, which meant more roaming meat-addicts looking for fresher prey. Every bit of ill fortune that befell this place inevitably spread to the rest of the city as well.

The square was silent and dark. He stepped over to the stall that held the bomb and gave it a quick once-over. No new explosives. On the cobbles he could see a bit of chewed wire from when the rats had disarmed the bomb, bright as a party favor.

“I can see you there,” he said.

No answer. Water dripped from the dewy eaves. Yafya straightened up, and shrugged off his coat. Underneath he had nothing but his usual t-shirt on, and the damp air bit into his bare hide.

“You’re the one who invited me, aren’t you? You could at least greet me properly.”

In the outer shadows, a dim point of light flared, then went out. In its wake came a scent that made Yafya's muzzle crease up. Unbearably acrid, like bitter gasoline. A shape detached from the murk. Footsteps crunched as it made its way to the center of the square.

The Cornered Rats had told him that this animal was a male, but he never would have known otherwise. He was stocky, barely chest-height to Yafya. He wore a raincoat that was a dark and slimy green like something dredged from a deep swamp; its hood was up, and the darkness it cast over its owner's face was so complete that he appeared to have a hole for a head. From that dark jutted a crooked smoking pipe, the source of that evil smell. His species was impossible to determine – that coat covered up his outline and his scent was obliterated by the pipesmoke – but as he rested the pipe's bowl in the palm of his hand, wicked claws glinted in the square's scant light.

"I was given to understand that Karlov the Doberman was this organization's leader," Yafya said, unruffled. "So what does that make you?"

The stranger breathed smoke. He looked in no hurry to answer. Yafya made one last attempt.

"Let me be clear," he said. "I have no love for this part of the city. The games you play here only demand my attention because they affect civilized animals elsewhere. And since you let my subordinates go unharmed, I'm willing to be lenient. I'll make this offer once: surrender any weapons you have, and come along quietly."

The stranger took out the pipe, turned it over, and tapped it out on the cobbles. It plucked open the folds of its coat (nothing but blackness through there, either) and slowly tucked the pipe inside.

Yafya tensed his legs.

The gun came out in a quicksilver blur and its cacophony tore apart the square, the stranger firing before his aim had even fully settled on the Beastar. Despite that, he was a frightfully good shot, and would have hit Yafya several times dead-center if he hadn't been ready for it. But Yafya's leg scythed out and the stall he'd leaned against exploded outwards in a cloud of steel and shrapnel, and as the stranger fired through that debris Yafya's sneaker parted it from overhead, descending like a meteorite. The stranger leapt back and Yafya's heel smashed into the ground where he'd stood, hard enough to fissure the stone out for six feet in all directions, and as he took aim again Yafya stepped forward and swung up his other foot. The toe of his shoe glanced off the gun, wrenched it from its owner's grip and sent it spinning heavenward.

Yafya's kicks lashed out with such force that the stranger's coat rippled in the gale they cast; he dodged, and dodged again, but as the gun clattered to the ground Yafya finally hit him. He blocked the blow with his crossed arms and grunted as he was flung back, the first sound he'd made since Yafya had encountered him. His back ended up against the wall of one of the apartments on the square's periphery. The Beastar sprang forward and there were muffled screams from inside the building as his kick tore apart the cheap masonry like cardboard.

The stranger had dodged, was standing at the edge of Yafya's vision, arms dangling. Yafya turned, stepped forward, and felt warmth on his side. His shirt was torn, a thin line of blood oozing from the hide underneath. One of his opponent's claws must have nicked him.

“You move well,” he said. “Those arms must be feeling rather numb.”

The stranger’s hood tilted. Theatrically, he rose both arms, and flexed. Yafya’s eye twitched.

“Have it your way.” His shoe scraped the ground. “You’ll tell me all you know before we’re through. And then, I’ll take you to meet the ladies in my garden.”

He didn’t charge forward this time. Instead he stomped down hard, his shoe embedding itself into the pavement up to the ankle, and with a roar he ripped it up and out, sending a spray of stone shrapnel towards the stranger with ballistic speed. The stranger blocked most of it, even snatched a baseball-sized hunk of rock out of the air and tossed it aside, but Yafya was already upon him again, ensnaring him in the dervish of his killing feet; those claws lashed out again and slashed open his jeans, raked down his thigh, only to nick the plated leg-guards Yafya wore underneath. The raincoat-clad animal was caught off-balance, he lunged forward again, but Yafya’s teeth flashed in a spitless grin and he spun on his heel and smashed his leg right into his ribs. The stranger went flying, then sprawling; he dug his claws into the cobbles to stop his roll, sending up a spray of sparks, but rose to his feet unsteadily, coughing hard.

He’d gotten one good shot in, his claws tattooing Yafya’s stomach with blood, but the wounds were shallow and that kick was enough to break lesser animals in half. Yafya’s teeth flashed as the two of them circled each other, the stranger nursing his injured side. The rain had picked up once again.

Yafya stepped forward, and then stumbled.

The ground must have been slippery. That’s what he thought as his leg buckled under him, just for a moment. But that moment was enough; there was a serpentine hiss of fabric as the stranger rushed forward, and Yafya recovered and kicked out again but too late. The stranger jukeed to the side and swiped again, and the ground spattered red as he raked Yafya bloody from chest to armpit. Yafya staggered back. He needed his coat. It was far too cold out here.

These wounds were nothing. Over the course of his long career he’d been beaten down again and again and had the scars to prove it. This animal could scratch at him all night and never bring him down. Yafya wanted to tell him that himself, but for some reason he couldn’t find the air. He was panting like he’d just climbed up a mountainside. The stranger came at him again, almost *sauntered* towards him, and dodged Yafya’s one weak kick and tore open his side with both hands. He kept his back to Yafya then, shaking the blood off his fingertips, as the horse took several hobbled steps forward and then collapsed.

The pavement was cold against Yafya’s cheek. His eyes, the eyes that had been the terror of every villain in the city, were bulging and bloodshot. As the drenched city heaved and swam in his vision, he heard a voice somewhere overhead, rasping and guttural as an ancient engine, tinged with dark amusement.

“They’re all the same once they go on the block.”

The fallen pistol shone dully amidst the rubble that Yafya’s attacks had created. The stranger went to it, picked it up, dusted it off. The hooded head turned back to the fallen Beastar.

“Living animal one minute, cooling meat the next. They don’t understand why it’s happening to them at first. ‘Not me,’ they think. ‘Not now. I had so much left to do.’ But there’s only one thing left for them to do. And for just a moment, they understand that. They see what they really are, underneath it all.”

Yafya saw him looming overhead. His sickened vision could only catch a glimpse of what was under that hood. A blunt muzzle full of sneering, jutting, crocodilian teeth.

“Hey, Beastar. Do you see it yet?” He aimed the pistol at Yafya’s head. “Did those eyes of yours see me coming?”

There was a distant *twang* and a silken hiss and the stranger snapped his head around and lurched away as a thin dark projectile streaked across the whole of the square. It embedded itself in the building on the opposite end, a bamboo crossbow bolt shuddering in the stone. He snorted and swung up the gun again, but then the nighttime was ripped open by thunder, the air suddenly alive with bullets, and he cursed and took off running as the gunfire burst apart the ground at his heels.

Gouhin strode forward, a snarling monochrome juggernaut, his SAW machine gun cradled in his arms. He stepped into the square and saw a dark shape clambering up one building’s façade with monkeylike agility, blood pattering down where he’d been grazed by Gouhin’s bullets. Gouhin took aim and the stranger turned, his muzzle gleaming in the light of the nearby window – and it was an unnatural, plasticine black, as though it had been coated in tar. A silhouette in the window quavered and ducked away, and Gouhin hesitated. The stranger grinned, pulled himself up and over the roof, and was gone.

Gouhin lowered the gun, then sighed and strapped it to his back.

“I hate bringing this damn thing out,” he said. “Close quarters, cheap buildings...I’m liable to plug civilians. Some of us still care about these animals, you know.” He turned back to Yafya, still laid flat. “You’re not paying those rats enough. Only reason I came down here is ‘cause they showed up at my doorstep and begged.”

Yafya didn’t answer. Gouhin put his hands on his hips and leaned over him, smirking.

“In any other circumstance I’d just leave your ass to rot, but these bombings pissed me off, too. Better the Black Devil you know than the one you don’t, eh?”

Still no response. Gouhin’s smile drained away. He rushed to Yafya’s side and got on his knees, gripping the horse by his chin. Yafya’s breath was a staccato rasp, lips slick with drool. The wounds he’d taken wouldn’t stop bleeding.

“Hey. Hey! Can you hear me? Blink if you can hear me!” Slowly, Yafya blinked. “You feeling dizzy? Nauseous?” Blink. “Cold, like you’ve got a chill?” Blink. “Can’t see straight?” Blink.

All of Gouhin’s jollity was gone now. He looked frantically around the square, spotted Yafya’s discarded coat, and grabbed it and laid it out beside its owner. He rolled Yafya onto it, careful to avoid touching his wounds, and then picked them both up.

“That depraved bastard,” he spat. “You are in very serious trouble, my friend. If you stay awake until we get to my clinic, then there’s a chance you’ll live to see the sunrise. Can you do that for me?”

Yafya didn’t even blink this time. His heart was pounding so hard that Gouhin could feel its tempo through the coat. He shook his head and took off running, the machinegun on his back jangling with every step.

Many animals saw him go. No one stopped him, because Gouhin one of the most admired and feared figures in the entire district, having survived multiple attempts by the Families to permanently stop him from “curing” their customers. But they watched, and before dawn, the talk would start. And the raincoat-clad animal that had laid Yafya low was already gone, faded away like mist.

* * *

Legosi had messed up.

He’d returned to Bebebe that night to find the shop empty save for its most senior employees – the younger animals like Thomas and Donson had already turned in. But Mika was there, and so was Sunaga, and it was clear the moment he walked in that they were both worried sick. He’d mumbled his way through an excuse, saying that he’d parked his bike several blocks away so it wouldn’t get stolen and then got turned around trying to find it again. Even as he’d spoken the words he could tell how false they sounded, but Sunaga had accepted them without complaint. He’d received profuse thanks from the bears to whom Legosi had made the delivery, and asked him to change out of his uniform and go home and get some sleep. Legosi had gratefully complied.

But all the next day there had been fresh tension in the restaurant. His coworkers chatted with him and smiled at him the same as always, but he could see their faces turning wary in the corner of his eye. Sunaga barely left his office, and when he did his conversation was brusque. Legosi might not have been very gifted when it came to social graces, but even he could hear an axe sharpening somewhere just behind his neck. And so, the day after, when Sunaga had politely called him into his office, Legosi had taken off his hat and gone in without a word.

Sunaga wasn’t big on luxuries, and office was a glorified broom closet, a plastic-and-linoleum cubbyhole where the only decorations were filing cabinets and framed newspaper articles praising Bebebe’s cooking. He sat behind the small folding table he used as a desk and gestured to the chair on the other side.

“Have a seat, Legosi.”

Legosi sat down, clutching his knees. His eyes darted around, then settled on something. Hanging from a cabinet drawer handles was one of his uniforms. Sunaga stacked some paperwork and pushed it aside.

“How’ve you been?” he asked. “The weather is a misery this time of year.”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“That’s good. I’ll cut to the chase, Legosi. Would you care to tell me again why you came back so late the other night?”

His old alibi made it halfway up his throat before it lost its grip and fell back into the abyss. He just stared straight ahead, his jaw wired shut. Sunaga let the silence roll out for a few more seconds, then sighed and got off his chair.

“At least you’re not trying to lie again,” he said. He pulled the uniform off his hanger and stretched it out. “Then tell me. What happened here?”

A thin whimper escaped Legosi’s throat. Displayed prominently was a small, dark hole punched through the side of the fabric. He remembered the bullets zipping around as he’d escaped the Butchers that night. He’d felt the breeze from one of them, right around where that hole would be.

“You were in the black market,” Sunaga said, and this time it wasn’t a question. “I heard reports about some kind of shooting incident that night.”

“Yes. But sir, I wasn’t-”

“I know you didn’t go there to eat. If you’d fallen back off the wagon then one of us would have noticed it yesterday. But I hope you understand why I’m concerned. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

If his mind whirled any faster then smoke would come out of his ears. He swallowed hard and opted to tell the truth. Or enough of it, at least.

“I noticed something strange,” he said. “After I made your delivery.”

“How so?”

“Something...someone suspicious. Going into the market. And everyone’s been so scared of what’s happening lately, and those animals who ordered the udon were so nice...I wanted to do something. To help. I wanted to try, at least.” He knotted his hands together. “But it didn’t work. I went into the side alleys, and I got lost. I got mugged. But I didn’t want to give them the money from the order, so I ran. And they tried to shoot me. But I’m okay.”

“You were nearly shot in the back because you went hunting for criminals in the middle of work?” Sunaga asked.

“I’m sorry.” It was all he had left to say.

Sunaga sighed. He held the uniform in his wings as if unsure of its purpose there. Eventually he set it aside and sat back down.

“Legosi, I think you should take the rest of the week off.”

“Am I fired?” he asked, voice hollow.

“No, you’re not fired. To be honest, if I tried to fire you at this point then your co-workers would probably mutiny. But you need some time to let this sink in.”

“Sink in?”

“You’re not the first predatorial offender I’ve hired,” Sunaga said. “Most of them were decent enough. But as you’re doubtless aware, that offense is a permanent mark on your record. Many animals in your situation don’t immediately grasp what ‘permanent’ means. They’re fine at first, but sooner or later they realize that the offense and what it entails isn’t going away – the stigma, the issues with getting work, and so on. I think it’s grotesquely unfair, myself. But it doesn’t change the facts. After six months, a year, two years...it sinks in, all at once. And sometimes they react badly. They do something regrettable.”

“But that’s not true!” Legosi blurted out. “The offense, it’s not...I mean, he said that that he would...”

“Who are you talking about?”

The Beastar was going to clean his record. Legosi’s rich friend would pull some strings. He could have said either of these things, but here in this office, the thought of them was as outlandish as the lie he’d told Sunaga. He started trembling all over. Sunaga laid his wing on the table and spoke, more gently now.

“Legosi, listen. You have a good heart. Everyone here sees that. I’m sure there’s a lot of animals in your life who care deeply about you. Just give them a thought before you do anything foolish, all right? You’re going to be fine, predatorial offense or not.”

“Yes, sir,” he whispered.

“Take a few days for yourself. Get some rest, get your head on straight. If that’s not enough then there’s counselors you can talk to about this, I could give you some recommendations. Okay?” Legosi nodded. “I’ll see you at the start of next week. Bright and early.”

He rose and left Sunaga’s office, head bowed. The staff working the kitchen watched him wordlessly as he went to the locker room and changed. He grabbed his bag and walked out of the restaurant, trying not to look at anyone’s face.

Legosi was in a stupor as he went to the train station. His guts were all knotted up. Sunaga had gotten the wrong idea, that was obvious – he hadn’t blundered into the black market because of some hidden angst over his record, he’d done it for Louis’ sake. Except Louis hadn’t wanted him to do it, and Legosi should have known that from the start. Did he think another act of brazen heroism would turn back the clock somehow? Was he making up for his failure at taking down Melon?

He knew that he’d missed his chance to clear his record when Melon had died. He just hadn’t thought that chance would be his only one.

He went underground and waited for the train. Animals clustered around him, carrying their scents. None of them paid him any heed.

It was like dropping something into deep water, this mark. When it first landed, you could reach in and snatch the invading object back out again. If you didn't catch it right away then it would be harder to find, but you could judge it by the ripples it had left. But if you waited too long, and the ripples faded, you could never find it again. It would sink in, become part of the water. Part of his life.

I have to break up with Haru.

The thought carried an unbearable weight. He felt his whole body sagging under it like damp newspaper. The animals around him chattered as he choked back his despair.

"At the train station," said a female voice beside him. "The signal? Yes. ...yes. Any minute now."

A spotted hand drifted into his field of vision. The phone's screen was on, displaying a blocked number.

"It's for you," she said.

Legosi turned. Standing next to him was a female cheetah, skinny and bent-whiskered, regarding him without much interest. Beneath her heavy clothes he picked up a familiar smell. Old meat, of so many species that it blended into a scent that was somehow nothing at all, like ashes in rain.

The train howled past him and groaned to a stop. He turned back and in its side saw the foggy reflections of slumped shapes standing behind him. The other animals on the platform boarded. The shapes stayed where they were.

Legosi's heart was beating very fast now. The doors were still open. The phone remained where it was, in the cheetah's grip.

He took the phone. The doors hissed shut. The train moved on.

"Hello?" he said.

"Is this Legosi the grey wolf?"

The voice on the other end almost made him cringe away from the receiver – a throaty, rusty rasp made all the worse by the poor reception. "Who is this?"

"It ain't polite to answer a question with a question, kid."

"Yes, my name is Legosi. Who is this?"

"First of all, don't worry about those folks standing nearby. They're not armed. This ain't the black market, after all. Wouldn't want to get in trouble with the cops."

"So you're with the Butchers," he said. "Are you their leader?"

"More of a silent partner," said the voice. "Though not so silent, lately. We already met."

Legosi's eyes narrowed in confusion, then widened. "You're the one who shot at me."

"I am. Sorry about that, by the way."

"You killed those other animals, too. They were on your side!"

"What we do in our territory is our problem, not your problem. Your problem is a certain dog I know who's very upset that you screwed up our job that night. Thanks to that, the Beastar came around yesterday, the cops might have our trail. And this dog – his name's Karlov, by the way, maybe you heard of him – he's a paranoid type. He doesn't like that you're still walking around."

Legosi felt the other animals' breath on the back of his neck. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk. If Karlov had his way then you'd be laid flat on that platform right now with your brains spilling out, but I'm of a different mind. You've got a reputation around these parts, you know. If we can reach some sort of an understanding, then all our problems might be solved at once."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You ain't dead yet," the voice said plainly. "If you're up for this, come to the market's entrance tomorrow after dark. Someone'll be there to take you the rest of the way. Come alone. I can't stop you from telling anyone else about this, but, well...if they tried to follow you for any reason, then I'm not accountable for what happens to them."

"I'll think about it. I have to think about it." He was gripping the phone so tight that it threatened to crack in his hand.

"Well, think fast. This is a limited-time offer. I can't leash these folks for very long." The voice coughed, loud and violent enough to make Legosi flinch. "If there's nothing else, then give back that phone. I'll be seeing you."

The line went dead.

He'd spent long enough talking so that other animals had joined them on the platform, waiting for the next train. Some of them gave odd looks at the unseen presences hulking over his shoulder. Still staring ahead, he held the phone out to his side and felt it plucked away.

"Don't turn around until we're gone," she said. A note of acidic sarcasm entered her voice as she added, "Enjoy your evening."

The Butchers receded. Legosi didn't look, but as the cheetah walked away his ears did pick up something familiar. Slightly uneven footfalls, a tinny metallic *clank* under the shoeleather. The cheetah had a prosthetic foot, just like Louis.

The next train came and opened up and he staggered in like a drunk and collapsed into the nearest seat. The other animals also spilled in and crowded around him, though some noticed the look in his eye and gave him a wide berth. He was no longer thinking about Haru. The train jerked and took off, ferrying all of them through the city's tangled underbelly.

The black market was re-populated tonight; business waited for no one, and the shopkeepers were once again slinging food and gossip in equal share. Several juicy, if unbelievable, tidbits had been added to the latter – stories that the Beastar had been brought low by some mystery animal and then bailed out by that infamous “psychotherapist” who went around beating meat addicts senseless. It got a good laugh from most animals who heard it, but it was a nervous sort of laughter. Everything seemed possible these days.

The atmosphere also bore a different sort of anxiety. The wares on display were beginning to look skimpy. The meat still came in, but less every day – even the larger meateries, the ones with direct lines to morgues and funeral homes, had half-empty cases. The vendors creatively arranged what product they had, hawked their scraps with an enthusiasm that bordered on hysteria. If this went on much longer, they’d have to start turning customers away.

One such vendor, a gangling hyena with a pronounced overbite, had his stall not too far off the main thoroughfare, where there was still plenty of bustle. He’d been shouting himself hoarse for hours and had started fanning himself to keep cool even in this wretched damp weather. When one animal stopped and stood in front of his stall, he almost dropped the fan in his excitement.

“Welcome, welcome! What can I get for...” He trailed off, noticed something about the customer. “Oh, it’s you. Even better!”

A female coyote with a strangely uneven shawl tied around her head regarded him, unsmiling. The Butchers’ identities might have been a mystery to most of the animals around here, but the shopkeepers got to know many of them by their regular deliveries. There were also certain other shared characteristics, if you knew how to look. They had to be some of the most humorless creatures on the planet, for one thing.

She was wearing a bulky overcoat and surreptitiously unbuckled it and pulled it aside. Lining its interior were a number of securely paper-wrapped parcels and she doled them out onto the counter, one by one. The hyena picked up each in turn, sniffed it, and stashed it under the stall. Most of the market’s smaller deliveries were done this way, the Butchers circulating through its streets like blood cells and dropping off their little prizes as they went. Full carcasses and larger cuts were brought in by truck, but in those shipments too their presence was known, the deliveries scheduled and paid for via the telephone calls that went on and on in their private corners of the underworld.

“This should keep me going for a bit longer,” he said. “Thanks. Should I pay you now, or...?”

“Your account will be charged,” she said. No emotion at all.

“It’s just that, I know things have been a little crazy around here lately. Can’t count on business as usual anymore.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” she said, and turned to leave. But the hyena leaned over the counter, digging his claws into the opposite side.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” he said, and she stopped and glanced over her shoulder. “Just, like, between you and me...these bombings. They’re saying that you’re behind them.” Her visible eye narrowed, but he gulped and pressed on. “Look, I’m not judging. You’ve been here for ages, you have your reasons. But I’m not next, am I? You’re gonna leave this spot alone, right?”

She turned back and started to walk off again and he lunged forward and grabbed her by the wrist. Now she looked at him fully, her lip curled up, one fang exposed, but he kept talking, babbling now, his own gaze feverish.

“Please. I’ll pay extra if I have to. Anything you want. If you’d only...if you just leave...” He looked around and saw the other stallkeepers studiously ignoring him. The other animals milling about paid him no mind but he suddenly felt hostile presences everywhere. He released her as though her pelt had burned him, and slunk back, huddling behind the counter.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. But I have kids to feed.”

“Everyone is hungry,” she replied, and then walked off.

He watched her go, and saw her wave dismissively – as if calling off someone else watching, unseen. With trembling hands he unwrapped the packages and laid out the meat – slick sausage links, crisp little rabbit haunches, chicken breast tender and pale as marshmallow. He regained his voice and started calling his customers over. And business went on, as the jaws of the evening closed over them all.

Cruelty Drenched in Marmalade

Agata didn't like to go outside these days. It was unfriendly times for the Shishigumi, and he had the dual curse of being one of its most distinctive and least threatening members – his height, bulk and dark-hued fur made him stand out at a distance, but anyone who got close was bound to notice his submissive posture and what Free had once memorably called his “cuddly kitten cheeks.” It wasn't a good combo. It made him a target.

But for that same reason, he was getting dragged around more than ever since Melon died. It was the same reasoning that Free had given when he'd sent him and Dope out to spread the word about Yafya; with the family's public image in such dire straits, they needed someone innocent and non-threatening who also looked like he could bend a steel bar into a pretzel if necessary. But he still regretted that Jimma was dragging him along today. They walked side-by-side under the steely skies, on their way to rendezvous with Agrippa and Cruce about the last few days' fascinating events – the revelation of the Butchers' treachery, and Yafya's subsequent visit and disappearance. No one had seen the horse since he'd walked through the market gates. It was like he'd dropped through a hole in the world.

“You're nervous,” Jimma said.

“I'm not,” Agata lied.

“Just hang back and let me do the talking. And stand up straight.”

“You don't have to talk to me like I'm still a cub,” he grumbled.

“I'm just saying, you've got to look respectable when the bosses are around. It reflects on the group.”

“I know what you're saying, it's how you're saying it. Everyone in the gang does it, even Dope. He's only a year older than me, for crying out loud.”

“Dope's also been in this neighborhood his whole life,” Jimma said patiently. “Besides, youth is a state of mind. You *act* young.”

They turned a corner into the webs of side-alleys, narrow enough for Agata's suit jacket to snag on the rough-walled buildings that closed them in.

“It's nothing to be ashamed about,” Jimma continued, and gave Agata a playful elbow in his side. “Everyone knows you're a certified shit-wrecker. Hell, if you'd been on courtyard duty the day Legosi came by, we might have actually won the fight.”

“Yeah, but then we wouldn't have had Louis as our boss.” Agata looked downcast. “On the other hand, without Louis, there's no Melon...”

Jimma nodded. “Better not to dwell on it.”

The black market was full of vacant lots, little squares of hardscrabble dirt where the architecture didn't quite join right, pocking the district like acne. Most of them were sheened with broken glass or discarded meat wrappers, and quite a few had dried blood on the walls, because these were bad places to be caught unawares. But they were good spots to discreetly meet up for the same reason, and Jimma and Agata emerged into one of them to find Agrippa, Zeke, and Cruce already waiting. Agrippa was smoking one of his plus-sized cigarettes with Zeke at his side; Cruce leaned on the opposite wall, sword in hand, his head lolling on his shoulders like his neck had turned to rubber. When he saw the lions approach, Agrippa took the cigarette out of his mouth and beamed wide.

"Look who it is!" he said. "Two kings of beasts, gracing us with their presence. We're honored, aren't we, Zeke?" Zeke said nothing. "You'll have to forgive him, he gets bashful around royalty."

"Funny," said Jimma, in desiccated tones.

"Ahh, I'm just ruffling your mane. It really is a pleasure." He looked between the two of them, his smile fading a little. "Where's that boss of yours gone to?"

"Free's on personal business. We're here in his stead."

"Personal business, hm? I suppose he's earned a little downtime. Don't get me wrong, it's awful news he gave us, but it's progress nonetheless." Broken glass crunched under his feet as he stepped forward. "At least the mask's fallen fully away from the Butchers now."

"Have you confirmed that they were responsible for the bombings?" Jimma asked. Behind him, Agata kept his chest thrust out and his fists clenched. Zeke was staring directly at him.

"I wouldn't say 'confirmed,' no. The little miscreants are still at large and Karlov's still nowhere to be found. But the meat supply's dropped rather precipitously in the last couple of days, as I'm sure you noticed."

Jimma nodded grimly. The meat trade had been getting squeezed little by little ever since the bombings had started, but when this most recent one had been intercepted, reports of incoming product had suddenly dropped by half. The vendors were beginning to panic. Many of them kept dried stores in case of emergencies, but if things went on like this, they'd run out of stock in less than a week.

"It has to be deliberate," Agrippa said, and took a drag on his cigarette. "They failed to blow us up, so instead they're starving us out."

"Any luck finding those old contacts you spoke about?"

"Less than I'd hoped. The few who remain are understandably nervous about resuming business while the Butchers are still in the picture. But I'll keep at it. It'd be shameful if the Dokugumi couldn't keep their word at a time like this. Even Cruce's boys have been holding up their end of things."

Cruce's grip tightened on his sword for a moment, but he said nothing. Agrippa turned his eyes to Agata, who tried very hard not to react. He could feel that ancient yellow gaze crawl into his skull, rummaging around for secrets.

"There is one thing I wanted to know," he said. "What's your name, son?"

"It's Agata," he said. Jimma had taken a protective half-step between him and the reptiles.

"Free told me that damn wolf was responsible for ruining the Butchers' evening," said Agrippa. His cigarette slowly circled his jaw. "But is he the one who informed you about it? I was given to understand that you weren't on the best of terms."

"It's complicated," said Jimma. "He helped us try and get rid of Melon."

"You recruited him to oust your own leader?"

"Yeah, right after we tried to drown him. Like I said, complicated."

"Hmph. It is true that conflict can breed new alliances, sometimes. Cruce here maimed Renne and it didn't hurt their relationship any." At the mention of Renne's name, a low growl rose in Cruce's throat. "So, Agata. When you informed Free about that little donation to the market's victims, it was Legosi who called you?"

It took him a moment too long to respond. "Yeah. Yes. It was Legosi."

"I know what you're getting at," Jimma said harshly. "Louis wasn't involved. He and Legosi know each other, that's true, but Louis is out of the game. He's probably ready to beat the crap out of that wolf himself for getting so tied up in all this."

"When Louis was still our boss, we all held Legosi up at gunpoint to make him stay away from us," said Agata. "It didn't work."

"Then we're lucky that his tenacity's working in our favor," said Agrippa. "But if he gets in touch again, let him know we can't guarantee his safety if he keeps showing his face around here. Him *or* the deer."

"I'll pass it along," said Agata, suppressing his growl.

"We'll leave you to your business, then. I'd appreciate if you could help the Madaragumi maintain order, but if you'd rather keep to yourselves then we'll understand. In my view, you had the hardest job of everyone, and still got it done." Agrippa clapped his hands together. "Now that we've identified the culprits, it'll make it all the easier to clean up this mess Renne dropped on our territory."

There was a silky, metallic sliding sound. Everyone turned to Cruce, who'd raised his head, bared his fangs. His sword was unsheathed just an inch, the blade glinting in the smothered sunlight.

"Stop bad-mouthing her," he said quietly.

The vacant lot was an indrawn breath. Jimma and Agata took several cautious steps back the way they'd come. Then Agrippa scoffed, and the moment passed.

"He's right. I'm making a fool of myself today." He glanced back at the lions. "Though it does make you wonder why he's so ready to defend her honor, doesn't it?"

"Not really," said Jimma. "We'll be on our way, if that's alright with you."

"Of course. We'll be in touch. Send my best to Free."

The lions left, Agata in front, Jimma watching his back. As soon as they were out of Agrippa's sight, their pace quickened considerably. Agata loosened his tie, ran his claws through his mane.

"You did fine," said Jimma.

"Like hell I did. He could see how scared I was." His heart was still pounding; the lizard had looked like he'd wanted to pick Agata up and swallow him whole, and he was big enough to make that seem possible.

"He was trying to get you to crack and you didn't. Trust me, that's good enough. Agrippa scares the shit out of everyone."

"Why did he want to know about Legosi so bad? Or Louis?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if he's still got a grudge against them for shaking things up around here. We'll tell them to be careful, don't worry."

They came out into the wider streets, where other animals wandered, bundled up against the chill. A few of them glanced at the lions and moved on. Agata smoothed out his own jacket and shivered.

"Jimma, I think we need to get back to the headquarters. Right now."

"Yeah, better pass the details of this to Free as soon as we can."

"It's not just that," he said. "I've got a really bad feeling all of a sudden. Like...you know when the air gets all tingly right before a thunderstorm? Feels like my whole mane's standing on end."

Jimma stared. He had a famously disconcerting stare – that patch of darker fur over his right eye gave it an intensity that could rival Zeke's. But then he nodded, and patted Agata's shoulder.

"Lion intuition," he said. "Always thought you had a knack for it."

"No offense, but I really don't believe in that divination stuff."

"Too bad. It believes in you."

The sky didn't promise thunder. It remained the same drab grey that it had been when they'd first set out. But as they walked, Jimma thought he could pick up on what was making Agata so uneasy, a sense of imminent bad tidings rolling into the black market like a storm front.

* * *

Agrippa watched them leave. and Zeke pushed away from the wall and went to the center of the lot. Cruce also shuffled forward, his sword fully sheathed again.

"They're an interesting bunch, to be sure," Agrippa said thoughtfully. "I'm starting to see how they've survived this long. They've had some bizarre twists of fortune."

"Can I go now?" Cruce asked.

"Just remember what we talked about, and let your boys know as well. We need to keep everyone on the same page until this is through." He regarded Cruce out the corner of his eye. "You're looking healthier than the last time we met. Not shaking so much. Finally laying off the Silvervine?"

"There's no point. It's not helping me."

"But your mind's a bit clearer, right?"

"I guess," said Cruce.

"Glad to hear it," said Agrippa. "Go ahead, Zeke."

Zeke grabbed Cruce by the scruff and smashed his fist into his jaw. Fresh blood splattered the alley as Zeke hit him again, and again, knocking off his hat, lathering his muzzle with gore; Cruce feebly raised his hands in surrender but Zeke hit him with another haymaker that laid him flat on the ground and then straddled him and kept on punching. Agrippa dropped his cigarette and ground it beneath his boot as the beating continued. Eventually Zeke hauled him up and shoved him towards Agrippa, who clamped his hand around Cruce's throat and squeezed. Cruce flailed and kicked his feet but the lizard had a grip like an iron vise, and then he was centimeters away from those craggy yellowed teeth.

"That's twice now you've embarrassed me in front of the lions," Agrippa hissed. "Do it again and I will rip you open and wind your steaming guts around that little toy sword. Is that understood?"

Cruce wheezed out something unintelligible and Agrippa hurled him away. He pushed himself up, hacking mucus, his hands and knees bloody with shattered glass. Agrippa loomed over him, a black-coated obelisk of scale and bone.

"Go and have your gang clean you up," he said. "The Madaragumi, reduced to nursemaids for a worthless junkie. You should have killed yourself years ago. Spared them the indignity."

"You never...would have..."

Agrippa bent down. "What was that?"

“If Renne was still here...you never would have done this...”

Agrippa spat and Cruce yelped and lurched away. The spittle that pooled near him was discolored, streaked with venom.

“But she isn’t here, is she?” he said. “She brought that on herself. You’d better get that through your head while you still can.” He turned away. “Zeke, let’s go.”

Cruce stayed on the ground until the sound of footsteps faded. He wiped blood off his face and reached out for his hand, only to smear it with the fresh blood on his hand. He looked forlornly at the crushed cloth and tried to stand and staggered back, hitting the wall, sliding down. Zeke’s beating and Silvervine withdrawal were taking turns reducing his head to pulp. The world around him melted and swam like warm wax; the old marks and bloodstains on the wall across from him spiraled into new and menacing shapes. He stayed there, hugging his hat and sword close to his withered chest, watching those patterns, trying to catch a glimpse of something.

* * *

The Butchers were famed for their talent at remaining unseen, but Karlov the Doberman outstripped them all – if anything, he was too good at it, having long since passed into urban-legend status for many of the market’s denizens. Everyone acknowledged that the Butchers themselves existed, of course, but the idea of them being run by some uptight dog who spent his entire life underneath their bootheels was just a little bit too outlandish. It was widely believed that the organization was actually some kind of co-op between the Families themselves, and Karlov was a convenient cover story to make sure that no one outside the privileged few knew who was really in control. Karlov himself did nothing to dispel these rumors. He would sometimes stay hidden for months at a time, in his office and the pounding, stinking labyrinth beneath.

But he did go out, every now and then. If asked, he would have said that true stealth was less about remaining unseen, and more about being seen by the right kind of eyes.

In one of the claustrophobic clusters of smaller shops off the market’s main roads was a restaurant identified only by the clapboard hanging above its door. The sign read “MEATBALLS” and that was what the restaurant sold, with no information given as to the animal or animals that had been mulched to create them. The only seating was a few tiny tables and a splintery counter at the far end of the small dining area, and anyone who ate here took their taste buds into their own hands.

The sales counter was abandoned; the owner and cook, a twitchy pangolin with a milky cataract over one eye, knew when to be discreet, and had carried out their food and retreated into the kitchen’s depths. There were two diners in here now, barely visible in the restaurant’s half-light. One was eating enthusiastically, and his ears were dark and sharp as two slits in space.

Karlov had a tidy ziggurat of meatballs on his plate, and he speared them with his fork and ate them one by one. His muzzle clip didn’t move with the rest of his face as he chewed, and

the effect was eerie, like the two halves of his head had come disjointed. His fellow diner didn't notice. She regarded her full plate silently.

"I've always been fond of this place," Karlov said. He took a sip of water, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, and got back to eating. "It's like each bite is a meal all its own, especially if you try to identify the flavors. I like to let it rest on my tongue for a second, let it roll around. Have you ever eaten grubs? It's a singular experience."

He looked over, smiling, and then his smile faded. The coyote beside him had her hands folded, her own mismatched, one-eared shadow as still as if it had been scorched into the woodwork.

"Not hungry?" he asked.

"Not really. Sorry."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. Shouldn't have asked you to get up this early, I know the hours you keep. But with one thing or another, our schedule--"

"I'm alright," she said. "It's just...you're not the one I was expecting to see."

"Oh. Yes, that makes sense." He set his fork aside. "He really did want to meet you, but after all that's happened in the last few days, he had to change priorities. He has another appointment scheduled elsewhere and he's been busy making preparations."

"I understand."

"But, silver lining, he left the decision up to me. And I referred you in the first place, so... congratulations. You're in."

"Is it really that easy?" she asked.

"You told me your story. That's enough."

"It's not a very remarkable story, though, is it?"

"No. It's exceedingly common. But that doesn't make it any less tragic." He picked up another meatball between thumb and forefinger, popped it into his mouth, chewed thoughtfully. "And you've been with us a little over three years, by my count. As far as I'm concerned, you're trustworthy. That's really all there is to it."

She nodded, slowly, but her grave expression didn't shift. She appeared unconvinced. Karlov sighed.

"I don't blame you for being skeptical," he said. "Dogs like me are bred to be so damned affable that our sympathy can sound insincere. But I am sympathetic."

"I believe you. But I still thought this would be harder. Not just getting your approval, but accepting it myself." She put a hand to her heart as if confirming it still beat. "Instead, all of this feels like any other day. If it's all this easy, then does it mean anything?"

Outside, the wind picked up. The shop's sign rattled on its chains like a restless ghost. Karlov folded his own hands, still gloved, speckled with the juices of his meal.

"Your ear," he said.

"What about it?"

"There is a story. Years ago, somewhere far from here, I heard it said that living things still harbor something of themselves after they've departed. Their soul, their essence, whatever you want to call it – a fragment of it remains. In the bodies of animals like ourselves, that fragment of immutable life is far more potent. And it becomes one with whoever consumes it. The story goes that this is why we carnivores have so much strength compared to herbivores, especially after we partake in meat. We go through our lives with bellies full of ghosts."

His head swiveled on his neck and he regarded the coyote, who stared back at him, mesmerized. Gently, he reached out and waved his hand through the empty space where her ear had been.

"I think this choice is easy for you because you made it a long time ago," he said. "When animals lose a part of themselves like this, they usually think that it's gone forever. But we can't escape ourselves. You understood that, didn't you? You don't want to forget anything. There's some part of yourself that you wanted to preserve. So that no matter how you changed, you would never let it go."

Her eyes shone overbright in the murky shop. Karlov went back to his food. He speared a meatball and mashed it against the roof of his mouth with his tongue. The ground meat separated into numerous moist fragments and he savored each of them in turn – smoky, spicy, sour – until the sound of weeping beside him went silent.

"Don't think of this as a kindness," he said. "If someone tells you they're being kind, it's only because they're waiting to be even crueler later on. He believes that very strongly. What we're doing here is just business, in the end."

"What do I need to do?" she asked, wiping her tears away.

"I'll give you another address. Tell the animals there his name – his, not mine. Tell them it sounds like rain. They'll give you what you need, and we'll let you know the time when it comes. What happens then is up to you."

"There's a place uptown. Meteor Square. It's where the city holds its festival every summer, and every winter they put up the Rexmas display. There's this overlook, rimmed with glass so that it catches the light. During the festival it's like the air is full of rainbows." She angled her head up as if expecting a meteor to fall now, fresh tears running down her cheeks. "Every year I'd go there. Watch my guiding star."

"It sounds like a beautiful place."

“The festival is over,” she said. “There won’t be any rainbows. But that’s where I want to be.”

“Until then, please remember to eat. You can’t live on ghosts alone.”

“I will. Thank you.” She looked at him. “Is there anything else?”

“Just one thing.”

He reached to the stool beside him and picked up his camera, adjusted the lens. Something about the way he did it made her uneasy – his movements were too quick, too harsh, and the camera’s clicks sounded like a snapping neck.

“I’ll keep the flash off,” he said. “This lighting fits the mood very well. Just stay like that for me, please.”

He raised the camera and its dead black eye transfixed her.

“Should I smile?” she asked.

“No,” said Karlov. “You’re perfect the way you are.”

* * *

Legosi stood at the black market’s threshold, once again breathing in its aroma. Sunset was over an hour ago and the thoroughfare was flooded with lantern-light, and his shadow stretched long and thin into the street behind him, nervously flexing its claws. He’d spent most of the day in bed, watching the stain in his ceiling and hoping it would form into the face of someone he knew and persuade him away from this course.

He thought of turning away. But then he noticed a still shadow amongst the other milling animas, a trenchcoated jackal whose ears jutted from his head like radio antennae. He was staring directly at Legosi. When their eyes met, he turned on his heel and walked off, and after a moment, Legosi followed.

He sensed the change in the market’s atmosphere. That slight edge of desperation he’d picked up in the market-goers’ sales pitches had grown far keener in the last two days, and their wares looked scanty even though the night was still young. He saw two pumas arguing with one of the shopkeepers, and it looked like their dispute was about to get violent, but the jackal turned a corner and Legosi followed, leaving them behind.

The black market’s depths bloomed out like a corpse-flower, a dizzying expanse of slime-slicked byways and dead ends. Legosi had patrolled here on a regular basis during his time with Gouhin but it wasn’t long before he found himself in unknown territory, shopfronts he’d never seen, apartments sagging and gray as though they’d sprouted mushroomlike from the pavement. He felt more and more gazes on him as they went deeper.

The jackal stopped beside an unmarked steel-paneled door and tilted his snout up. Legosi followed suit, and saw a trio of lit windows, three stories up. When he lowered his head again, the door was open, the jackal standing sentinel beside it. Legosi gulped and went in.

The building's interior was pitch-black and redolent with the smell of mildew and rotted wood. He felt like he was somewhere that no living thing had business standing. Like the interior of some titanic beast long-dead. He found the stairs and ascended carefully, testing each one before placing his weight on it; the steps all held, but groaned and cursed at him with every movement. When he reached the third floor, the threads of light spilling from the outline of a single door were enough to make him squint. He approached that door, and opened it.

He couldn't quite understand what he saw on the other side. The space was familiar, but it had no business in a building like this. It was a bar, a cozy candle-and-mahogany affair enough to seat maybe a dozen animals in total. Along the right wall was a trifecta of tall, thin windows looking out on the streets below, and to the left was the bar itself, its shelves mostly empty, the hypothetical bartender nowhere to be found. Only one animal was there, seated at the bar with his pipe lit and puffing, creating a foul miasma that skulked in the room's upper reaches. His raincoat crinkled as his shadowy head turned to Legosi.

"God damn, you are a *tall* son of a bitch," he said.

"I remember you," Legosi breathed. "I almost tripped on you!"

"And no wonder. You probably couldn't see me from all the way up there. Close the door and take a load off." Legosi stayed where he was, and the animal huffed smoke. "Kid, think about where you are. If I wanted to kill you then it wouldn't make any difference if you were sitting or standing."

He had a point, much as Legosi didn't want to admit it. He swung the door shut and sat at the bar, keeping an empty stool between the two of them. He tried to get a better look at the raincoated animal, but even at this distance it was surprisingly difficult. The murky light messed with his night vision and his hands and the muzzle glimpsed beneath his hood were a solid, glossy black – it wasn't fur or flesh, but some kind of covering.

"I keep this place nice for meet-ups," he said. "I'd offer you a drink, but..."

"Who are you?" Legosi asked. "*What* are you?"

"The name's Pat," he replied. "Easy to remember, right? Like raindrops. Pitter-pat." He drummed his claws on the bartop – claws that protruded from the gloves he wore, like they'd been sewn in. Pat followed Legosi's gaze and grinned around his pipe.

"They're not real, are they?" Legosi said.

"Reinforced ceramic. Same as my teeth. Or *your* teeth, for that matter." Legosi looked up in surprise. "I can tell dentures from a glance. The light doesn't strike 'em properly. It's a nice set, don't get me wrong."

His pipe was a cheap thing, looking like it had been whittled from driftwood, and the rancid smoke it spewed out made Legosi's nose water. He couldn't penetrate that smell to identify its owner. Pat's own jagged teeth winked under his hood; he looked amused at Legosi's distress.

“Breathe through your mouth, I say. That sniffer of yours won’t do you any good here.”

“You’re covering up your species. Why?”

“Why do you think?” Pat asked.

Legosi thought about Melon, who spent a long and bloody career confounding the authorities. Hop-scotching between herbivore and carnivore when it suited him. “It helps you stay hidden.”

“Smart kid. But there's more to it than that. This organization, it doesn’t care about species either. We take in canines, felines, avians, reptiles, and so on. Hell, there’s even some herbivores on the payroll, but they mostly work the phones. We figured out this ‘equality’ thing way before the rest of the black market.” Pat flexed his hand, the enameled claws catching the light. “Far as I’m concerned, we shouldn’t be tied down to the pieces we’re born with. I like to tinker. Make dentures, prosthetics...”

“And bombs?”

“Ah. Well.”

Legosi’s sight and smell were diminished in this strange space, but his hearing still worked fine. Raindrops had begun to slap the windows outside. The room settled and creaked around them. And as Pat shifted in his seat, Legosi heard metal clinking under his coat. He was armed.

“You tried to kill me,” Legosi said. “You could have killed me at the train station. Why did you ask me to come?”

“Because I wanted to see you up close. You really have no idea what animals around here say about you, huh?”

“I know the Families don’t like me.”

“This goes way beyond the Families,” said Pat. “About a year ago, some wolf brat from this hoity-toity boarding school uptown strolls up to the Shishigumi’s front door and beats the living daylights out of every single one of ‘em. He leaves with this rabbit girl – what, she a classmate of yours or something?” Legosi didn’t answer and Pat shrugged. “Anyway, they leave, and he disappears. A little while later, folks from all across the market start getting smacked around by what looks like the same wolf, just with a muzzle and a raggedy fur-cut. He disappears again. Then there’s this blood-bone drug I’d heard about. It was really taking off! Until a few of the dealers run into, you guessed it, a certain wolf. They wind up in the hospital, and by the end of the week the whole operation’s gone under. And finally, Melon.”

“I didn’t catch him,” Legosi said.

“No. But animals saw you clinging to the outside of the Shishigumi’s tower, white as a ghost, and then chase him down. He got away...and a few days later, he was shot dead. Goodbye, Melon.” Pat chuckled. “There’s some who think that there’s a damn hex on you or something.

Be good, or the Big Bad Wolf will come and rain down hell. I don't place much truck in rumors, myself, but when I found out you were the one I tried to plug that night, I couldn't help but be interested. So here we are."

"And your partner, the one who wanted me dead..."

"Karlov. Don't worry about him."

"If you're going to bribe me, or threaten me, then it won't work," said Legosi. "There are good animals living here. I won't let you just destroy their home."

Pat went still. The tension in the room spiked. He puffed his pipe and his hooded head angled toward Legosi again.

"Have to say, you've really got a pair on you. Saying something like that when you're right in the middle of our territory."

"This place doesn't just belong to you." Legosi gripped the edge of the bartop. "Why are you destroying it like this? Isn't it your home, too?"

"I want you to understand," said Pat. "The Butchers really are the most equal group out there. The Families have their shared species and their silly uniforms, but what we have goes deeper than that. Do you know what it is?" Legosi shook his head. "Let me ask you something first. About Melon. He was an herbi-carni hybrid, yeah? Did that mess up his senses at all?"

"Someone told me that had trouble tasting anything," said Legosi. He still distinctly recalled that evening with Deshico.

"Ha! Knew it!" Pat thumped the bar. "There's no way someone born with his wires crossed like that would've gotten out scot-free. But that just let him in on a deeper secret, get it? Without any of those distractions, he understood what all of us *really* have in common."

"What is it?" Legosi asked.

Pat didn't answer right away. He tilted his head upward and expelled another long, slow jet of smoke. And maybe it was just this dim light and that stinking pipe, but the room seemed to be growing darker around Legosi, like the shadows held within Pat's clothes were leaking out. He wanted to leave. The air in here was choking him.

"Go outside, and what do you see?" Pat said. "All these happy market-goers, tearing into whatever meat they can get their hands on. If they can't get it from here, they hit the road and gobble up live prey. They can't get enough of it. The taste of death between their teeth."

"Not all carnivores are like that," Legosi snapped. "We can get along with herbivores just--"

"Herbivores aren't any different!" Pat jabbed his finger at Legosi. "I know about that mark on your record, kiddo. You have any idea how many offenders are in our group? And even the ones who ain't marked can't so much as bare their teeth without herbivores throwing the book at them. That's how they feel safe. It's how they feel *strong*, knowing that all those

carnivores are slowly choking to death on the leashes slapped around their necks.” He swiveled on his stool, spread his arms wide. “We’re nothing but appetite, and all of us are hungry for the same thing. By tooth and claw, or rule of law, we all just want to make someone *hurt*.”

Legosi tried to rise but he felt like he’d been riveted in place. Pat was getting more animated, swaying like a cobra in his seat; beneath his hood, Legosi could glimpse the beetle-shine of eyes set deep within that dark. His claws twitched and twinkled in hypnotic patterns.

“Those idiots in the Families seriously thought we’d be happy ferrying their food back and forth ‘til the end of time,” Pat went on. “But the bill’s come due. It’s our turn to eat, now. You can’t stop it, any more than you can stop the tides from coming in. And you can’t fight it any more than you can fight your own nature. It was a bad idea to even try.”

Legosi’s hackles rose. “I’m nothing like you.”

“C’mon now, don’t shortchange yourself. It’s been a while since I’ve seen somebody who gets off on violence the way you do. Makes me feel twenty years younger just thinking about it.” Pat leaned forward, grinning. “You get into any good fights before you started stomping around the black market? You can tell me, we’re all friends here.”

The image rose up in his mind unbidden. Bill splayed out on the auditorium floor, the spotlights reflected in his widened eyes as Legosi drove his fist into the tiger’s face over, and over, and over. The feel of his snout distending under Legosi’s knuckles. The planks spotting red.

Pat grinned wider as Legosi’s treacherous ears pinned back. “Thought as much. It’s a real shame you didn’t come to us instead of that noodle shop. I’d have given you a job on the spot.”

Legosi flipped through his memories of the last year like playing cards – the night on the bench with Els, his confrontations with Louis, the sun cresting the hilltop as he decided to drop out of school, the crackle of rice cakes on the Hidden Condo’s roof. But the ones that stood out clearest all smelled like blood. Bill. The lions. Riz. The dealers. Melon. The scars over his eye felt like they were on fire all of a sudden. He couldn’t breathe in here.

“Anyway, that’s my piece,” said Pat, cupping his pipe again. “I know it’s a lot to take in. But I promise, by the time you get back home, this will all make sense.”

Haru, Legosi thought.

The two of them together, earlier that week. Haru leaning over him, sharing his heat, the apartment’s light shining behind her head. The way they’d walked through the black market, her small hand squeezing his own hard enough to divot the flesh. The nights he’d held her. Her heartbeat against his own.

Legosi asked, “What about love?”

Pat's pipe drooped for a moment. He glanced over to Legosi. Then he started chuckling again, low and disbelieving at first, then rising into an ugly cacophony like a backed-up drain that trailed off into a wet, hoarse cough. He pounded his chest, bent over the bar.

"You...w-what about...oh shit, kid, stop looking at me like that! That face is so *earnest*, it's gonna...I c-c-can't..." He tossed the pipe aside and buried his face in his hands, giggling high and jagged – and then Legosi slammed his fist into the bar and the laughter cut off at once. Pat lowered his hands. That black hole of a face turned to Legosi fully.

"I'm in love with an herbivore," he said. "It took me a long time to figure it out. For a while I thought that I just wanted to hurt her. That my feelings were just covering up a carnivore's hunger. But they're not. I care about her, and all the other animals around me. Sometimes I care so much that it feels like I might burst." Outside, the rain pressed against the window like an eavesdropper. "You're wrong. Love is real. And if you keep trying to hurt other animals, then I'll stop you."

Pat had gone very still. Legosi retracted his fist but didn't dare to turn his back on him. The bar's choking atmosphere had turned explosive.

Pat heaved a sigh and reached into his coat. Legosi tensed up, but his hand came out clutching not a gun, but a small stack of what looked like photographs. He flipped through them and nodded, apparently satisfied.

"Alright, alright, let's all calm down," he said. "Sorry about going off like that. I'm old and cranky and I don't get out too much, all my social graces have tarnished a little." He waved the photos at Legosi. "But I don't want you walking outta here thinking that I'm some kind of monster. I take care of my own, too. Karlov, for example. He was a photographer before we met, a good one. But some stuff went down, and he wanted to hang up his camera for good. I told him, 'What are you thinking? You're just gonna let a talent like that go to waste?' So he kept at it. Here, take a look."

He slid the photos over to Legosi. Hesitantly, he picked them up.

The picture on top reminded him of the wall of shame in Gouhin's office, the photo collage of all the meat addicts he'd abducted. This one was a, herbivore, a deer (the momentary resemblance to Louis made his heart snag up) with under-developed antlers and a badly cut lip, but there was that same look of hollow desolation in his face, washed pale by the camera-flash. The next photo was of a male goat with the same expression, looking at the camera sideways like trying to glimpse the sun. Legosi saw that his beard was pink at the edges. Bloodstained.

The pictures covered all species. He saw a dingo, a hare, a spectacled bear, all with that downcast hopeless face, many with their fur crusted with the salt of their tears. He started to look for details besides the animals themselves, where they might have been when the photos were taken, but saw only slivers of something industrial, chromed steel or jagged mesh. But then he came to a photo just past the middle of the pile – a female antelope, eyes half-lidded, her head resting on some kind of table – and saw the square sharp shadow printed on the camera-flash. A raised cleaver.

He heard Pat say, "They're all the same once they go on the block."

His fingers wouldn't stop moving, though he flipped through the pictures faster and faster. Now that he knew what to look for he noticed how many of the subjects' eyes were fixed on something away from the photographer. The approaching blades. These were animals about to die.

The final one showed a female red fox, turned to the camera, mouth slightly open. One eye was covered by an eyepatch; the other one was wet with tears and shone in the flash. The tragedy in her face was carved deeper than all the others. Pat leaned over, setting his pipe aside.

"Ahh, yeah, that's his best work yet. Renne, ex-boss of the Inarigumi. That's the look the bitch gave him when she saw how we'd strung up all her friends and peeled 'em like grapes." He looked up to Legosi, teeth bared. "What do you think, kid? Doesn't that just *fill your belly*?"

Legosi's vision flashed red and he hurled the pictures aside and lunged at Pat, but then Pat *blurred* and Legosi's elbow shrieked as it was twisted and slammed flat into the bartop, and Legosi's scream followed as Pat's other hand rammed down, claws out, spearing him through the small of his back. Legosi was trapped like that, pinned to the bar with his outstretched arm in Pat's grip and those claws coring into his pelt. That shadowed face drifted in front of his like a photo-negative moon, drool dripping from its leering snout.

"That's a shame," Pat said. "I guess neither of us could keep it in our pants tonight."

"Go to hell," Legosi growled, and then cried out again as Pat's claws twisted.

"You'll be getting there well before me. Feeling a little woozy, mutt? The shit I've got perking through your blood right now will put you down in a couple minutes, tops." He jerked on Legosi's arm, sending out a fresh wave of pain. "Arrogant prick. You think you can talk that way to *me*? I might've missed my chance to blow your fucking head off, but this works just as well. Look at me with those beady little eyes. I want to watch you die."

A deep red stain was spreading through the back of Legosi's sweater. He coughed and said, "You told me not to let anyone know I was coming."

"I sure did. No one's ever gonna find you."

"But I didn't listen," he said. "There's something you should know."

Legosi reached back and seized Pat's wrist.

"I'm immune to Komodo dragon venom."

Pat had the time for a single surprised grunt before Legosi ripped his hand out of his back like a roosting tick. He wrenched his other arm out of Pat's grip and then turned, spun, and roared, hurling him into the bar's doorway. He struck it at cannonball speed, smashing the shabby wood to splinters and disappearing into the impenetrable dark beyond. Legosi

staggered back, gasping and massaging his twisted elbow. He looked around for exits. Nothing except those windows, and it was a tight fit and a long fall.

Something new came flying in through the shattered doorway – an olive-drab sphere about the size of a baseball. It hit the planks and rolled over, bumping against Legosi's foot. He peered at it, blinked, and then turned and sprinted full-speed at the window.

Legosi smashed through the glass, arms crossed over his face. The grenade went off a second later, a single hard percussive note that blew out the other windows and rolled down the market streets like a thunderclap. In that instant Legosi was suspended in air amidst the twinkling shards like some strange new constellation, and then gravity reached up and pulled him down and he flailed and grabbed a windowsill before he struck the asphalt. He heard shouting below as he climbed, and by the time he made to the roof he was hearing gunshots.

There was one last fusillade of gunfire from the bar windows behind him as he fled, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. A sizzling line of pain opened up across his thigh but it was promptly drowned in adrenaline. Legosi continued on, disappearing into the market's jagged skyline, as the Butchers swarmed underneath.

* * *

Pat stood in the shrapnel-pocked ruins of the bar, breathing heavily, pistol in hand. His coat was askew and dusted with splinters. He briefly looked for his pipe, then spat and walked out, holstering the gun and taking out his phone. He dialed as he descended the building. It picked up halfway through the first ring.

"How did it go?" Karlov asked.

"He pitched me through the goddamn door and then ran off. That's how it went."

"What? What happened?!"

"He's a fucking crossbreed," Pat said. He was already halfway down the last flight of stairs. "He shrugged off the venom like it was nothing. Now that I think about it, his eyes didn't look right either. There's gotta be some Komodo in his genes."

"I had no idea. Our checks never-"

"I didn't see it coming either. Call it a lesson learned."

"I told you that we should have just left that boy alone," said Karlov. *"He's more trouble than he's worth."*

Pat paused by the exit. "Trouble is exactly what I'm hoping for. I've been biding my time underground for way too long."

"What's the next course of action, then?"

"I'm headed down below. Get me updates from all the other groups. I want to hear the good news soon as we meet."

“Can do. And the bar, is it...?”

“It’s finished. Doesn’t matter. Not like we need it anymore. As for the mutt himself, I bet he’s on his way to that goddamn doctor. He’s in for a big surprise.”

He hung up without waiting for a reply and then ripped open the door and drifted out to the street, a malformed patch of deeper dark within the market’s gloom. His mismatched crocodile teeth gnashed and snapped, and other shadows detached from around corners and within the mouths of alleys, silently following Pat as if they’d been caught up in his slipstream.

* * *

Legosi did his best to keep to the rooftops, but his back and his thigh were both throbbing by the time he saw Gouhin’s clinic in the distance. He descended a nearby drainpipe, lost his grip, and fell the last eight or nine feet, crashing hard into the trash-strewn pavement. He laid there until he got his wind back and hauled himself up, limping the final stretch.

Gouhin’s front door was open and the doctor himself loomed large in the entryway. When Legosi approached he wordlessly grabbed him by the collar and pulled him inside, then slammed and locked the door. Legosi leaned against the foyer wall, breathing hard, his body spasming as the last of his adrenaline drained away.

“What’s the damage?” Gouhin asked.

“Is Yafya still here?”

“No. I got him out, the same as I’ll do for you. I’ve been smuggling animals out of this shithole for years, so don’t you worry about that. Now answer the damn question.”

“He clawed up my back. And my leg...I think I’ve been shot.”

“Stand straight.” Gouhin took Legosi by the shoulders, turned him, knelt down. There was a gash carved through his outer thigh, staining his pants red down to the knee. “Flesh wound, looks like. And if you’d been poisoned then you never would have made it here. You got lucky.”

“I’m sorry that I-” Legosi started to say, but then Gouhin rose and smacked him hard upside the head. Legosi yelped and reeled back, ears ringing from the blow, but the doctor caught him and steadied him before he could fall over.

“You had that coming,” he said, not unkindly. “I’ll patch you up. But first there’s something you need to see.”

Legosi was nothing if not a trusting soul, but even after Pat’s warning last night he’d believed that he should tell *someone* where was headed. Gouhin, he’d thought, would be his best bet – he was already stationed in the black market, and giving him some advance notice would spare Legosi the trouble of explaining himself if he turned up on his doorstep later. What followed had been a mostly one-sided conversation in which Legosi had actually dropped his

phone and taken cover on the other side of his apartment as Gouhin screamed himself hoarse into the receiver. When his invective had been exhausted, the weary doctor had told him about Yafya – how the Beastar had been dropped by some mystery Butcher with a voice much like the one that had called Legosi, suffering from the symptoms of acute Komodo dragon envenomation. It wasn't an uncommon sight around these parts given the presence of the Dokugumi, and Gouhin had a supply of antivenom on hand for the same reason, but for a little while Yafya had been standing with one foot inside of death's door. This information did not, of course, dissuade Legosi, and after a few more bitter curses, Gouhin had let him go.

"You're not feeling sick at all?" Gouhin asked, as they went deeper into the clinic. "Muscle weakness, blurred vision?"

"No. It just hurts." Legosi looked away. "I guess he didn't think he'd need the venom for me."

Gouhin's eye-markings narrowed skeptically, but he didn't press the issue further. He was leading Legosi to the holding pen for meat addicts – the place where he'd woken up last year, chained and muzzled.

"Got a few surprise customers tonight," he said, and unlatched the door. "Take a look."

Legosi went in, then stood and stared. The animals chained to Gouhin's bamboo pillar stared back.

There were four of them – two timber wolves, a bobcat, and a thick-limbed monitor lizard. There was barely enough room on the floor for them all to sit and the chains around their necks were so short they were forced to keep their heads raised to avoid choking to death. They'd been muzzled and cuffed and, judging by the sunset of bruises across their faces, beaten up very badly prior to winding up in this state. What could be seen of their faces expressed no clear emotion. Their gazes were flat and opaque as mannequins.

Gouhin guided Legosi out of the room. He shut and locked the door and then turned back to Legosi, arms crossed.

"World's losing its damn mind," he said. "I've been around since this group was just a twinkle in the Inarigumi's eye, and now they're trying to burn me out and blow the rest of us up."

"But. They weren't." He pointed at the door. "Those were the Butchers?"

"One has to assume. They came armed. Not just guns, but gascans and more of that plastic explosive. I thought this place was locked down, but they still almost managed to sneak in. If some of Yafya's rats still hadn't been hanging around keeping watch, who knows what kind of damage they'd have done."

"But how'd they move in so fast? I only just got away from Pat!"

"Is that the freak's name? Good to know." Gouhin pinched his nose. "But here's the thing. They've been here for a while."

“What?”

“I’ve got a hunch. When did you first come to the market tonight, Legosi? Think carefully.”

He hadn’t bothered to check the time. “Um...a couple of hours? Maybe a little less?”

“Yeah, see, that’s when they came.” All the orneriness had gone out of Gouhin’s voice now. What remained was genuine concern, and that made Legosi much more nervous. “They were waiting for you to show up at the market’s gates before they made their move. My guess is they hit my clinic because they knew it was important to you.”

“That’s not what Pat said. He said that if I came to talk then he’d-”

“He *lied*. I don’t know what this animal’s deal is, but anyone who smears poison on their claws doesn’t believe in fair play. He probably wanted to ruin you the moment you fucked up his bombing.”

Legosi stood there, dumbfounded, as Gouhin got out his cigarettes. He lit up and then peered through the bars on the door, watching the slumped and still shapes chained to the pillar.

“I’m thinking something else, too,” he said. “If these maniacs tried to destroy this place when you came to the market tonight...where else might they have gone?”

I promise, by the time you get back home, this will all make sense.

Pat’s rusty voice slithered out of Legosi’s mind. Gouhin must have seen his expression change, because he laid a hand on Legosi’s shoulder. He looked about to say something comforting. But then Legosi’s phone buzzed in his pocket, clear and harsh as a hissing fuse.

* * *

The proprietor of the Hidden Condo was known to be surprisingly considerate towards his tenants, but the building itself was still shabby at best, and nowhere was that clearer than the basement. The furnace and the water heater were down here, a duo of antediluvian machines that usually worked between two and four a.m. in the morning and just made an unholy racket at all other times of the day. The shelves were stocked with unlabeled cans containing twists of rusted and unidentifiable metal, the floor crammed with cardboard boxes full of newspapers that probably pre-dated the Great War. No one came down here without a good reason, and preferably a tetanus shot.

Three shapes were down here now. One was knelt in front of the furnace, its small hands busy at work. One had upturned the crates and scattered the newspapers all along the floor. The papers, dry as mummy wrappings, crinkled as the third one stepped up, their footsteps slightly uneven. In the basement’s murk could be seen the burnished gold of cheetah markings.

There were two exits to this place. One led directly outside and that door was now slightly ajar, the padlock that had been used to secure it tossed behind the trashcans. The other was at

the top of the basement's rickety stairs, and opened up into the condo itself. That second door creaked open now, and when it did, the three shapes all went still.

Small footsteps clattered down the stairs. They sounded somehow fretful; these were the steps of someone used to nervous pacing at long hours of the night. In the dark their owner was barely glimpsed, their wool like a wayward cloud, and when she reached the bottom of the steps her phone's flashlight illuminated the three visitors – a stone-faced sand fox, a badger with a deep scar on his upper lip, and the cheetah who had given Legosi his phone call the previous night. The latter had a gascan in her hand.

Sebun stood stock-still at the bottom of the steps, her phone held out before her like a shield.

“Hello?” she asked.

The fox stepped away from the furnace, where one of those sinister black bricks now gleamed, and reached into his coat.

* * *

Bebebe was in the middle of the dinner rush, the last vestiges of twilight dwindling from the horizon. Legosi's absence was felt. Not in terms of workload – he still couldn't turn an order around half as quick as the veteran servers – but his lumbering form had already become familiar to the rest of the staff, and it was a struggle to keep up their smiles to their customers.

But the udon was as good as ever, and the diners remained satisfied. The forecasted rain hadn't started yet and the sidewalk outside teemed with pedestrians. If the animals eating at Bebebe's window seats looked hard enough, they might have noticed one figure in that throng standing motionless across the street, everyone else stepping around them like river-water around a rock. They would see that figure joined by another. And yet another.

By the time the last sliver of purple sunset had died, four of them stood shoulder-to-shoulder, staring into Bebebe's lit interior. An emaciated lion, a pair of tailless alligators, a sea eagle with ghost-white feathers and a chipped beak. The lion had a duffle bag over his shoulder, and as he shifted its weight, something sloshed within. The restaurant continued to serve its food. Cars trundled past. The Butchers stood at the curb, waiting for the light to change.

* * *

Haru could feel the coming rain as soon as she stepped outside. It made her ears droop. The campus library's steps were glossy with mist.

“Of course this is the day I leave my umbrella at home,” she said.

“That's why you always need to keep a spare,” said Ako.

“Why, do you have one? Can I borrow it?”

“Um...I forgot it.”

“Figures.”

Haru smiled at her, and Ako smiled back, or at least made the effort. In the campus lights, the unevenness of face was plain to see.

Ako had changed since the incident that had occurred last April, and not just in the obvious ways. Her ill-advised kiss with her ex-boyfriend Airdo had ended with him ripping her face open to the bone in a blood frenzy, and she hadn't returned to class until the end of May. She'd received fur grafts to cover up the scars, an expensive procedure, but the clawmarks had been so deep that half her face was still furrowed with them even if they no longer showed bare flesh. And more than that, her bubbly, haughty personality was gone, as if it had bled out onto the campus grounds that day. Most animals wanted little to do with the quiet, furtive creature that remained, but Haru had stuck by her, and the two of them had become good friends.

Airdo had been less fortunate. Ako had refused to press charges against him for the assault, but he still probably would have received a predatorial offense if she hadn't begged her father, a well-to-do defense attorney who practiced uptown, to pull strings in his favor. He'd emerged from the incident with his record unscathed, but still had to change schools, and he and Ako no longer spoke. Haru hadn't known him well, but she wished him the best. She knew how it felt to be haunted by a bad reputation.

The two of them walked to the campus gates. Ako lived in the dorms, but Haru was still house-sitting, and it was a twenty-minute walk and a train ride from here to there. She just had to hope the skies wouldn't open up before she made it in.

“Do you want me to get you a cab or something?” Ako asked.

“Nah, I'm good. Little bit of walking never killed anyone.”

“Seriously, Haru, I'll pay for it myself. You know predations have been spiking.” Ako's hand drifted up to her face and she forced it down again. “This is a really crappy time for small-breed herbivores to be alone after dark.”

“I hear you. But we can't let ourselves get paranoid about this stuff. Living in fear isn't really living, you know?”

“It isn't really *dying*, either,” she said dryly. “But I get your point, I guess. Goodnight, Haru. Stay safe.”

“Same to you, Ako.”

The streets were emptying out, everyone taking cover in anticipation of the rotten weather. Haru drifted under the pooled glow of the streetlamps; her silhouette was like a thin scratch of chalk in the intervening darkness. Her face was calm but her ears swiveled and twitched, listening out for any trailing footsteps or idling engines.

Despite her cavalier attitude, she still keenly remembered her abduction by the Shishigumi, and had picked up a few paranoid habits after her rescue. Her fur stood on end any time she

caught a whiff of lion, for one thing. But anytime that old fear rose up, she thought of Legosi – Legosi, who still went through life looking like one big flinch, always finding something new to fret about whenever the merest possibility of commitment reared its head – and tamped it down again. She wouldn't let her inbred herbivore jitteriness justify his attitude. She had to be brave for both of them.

The sidewalks narrowed. The subway station wasn't far. She kept one eye on the road, squinting at a parked car with its lights on and shadows lounging within. Then she almost walked smack into a young snow leopard who'd been leaned up against a lamppost, phone in paw.

"Careful," he said.

"Sorry!"

He waved her off and she hurried away, feeling herself blush. Bravery was one thing, but she really needed to do something about the klutziness.

The snow leopard watched her go, then pocketed his phone. He fell in step behind her quiet as oil spreading through water, his strides easily matching her own. Haru turned the corner, entering one of the dark spaces between the lamps, and as she did so the snow leopard reached into his jacket and pulled out a knife, its thin blade shining like a fragment of broken moonlight.

* * *

Legosi stood in the clinic halls, unmoving. He no longer felt his wounds, or the heat building on his brow, or the tightness in his chest. He only felt his phone, still in his pocket, digging into him with its incessant, deafening buzz.

"Are you going to answer that?" Gouhin asked.

Royal Guard

He thought that if he just stood here forever then things would be alright. Eventually the phone would stop ringing and whatever bad news it stood ready to deliver would fall back into the electromagnetic ether along with its signal. But the buzzing wouldn't let up, and Gouhin's stare grew harder, and so Legosi willed himself to reach into his pocket and extract the phone.

The screen showed an unlisted number. Legosi answered the call. He brought it up to his ear.

"Hello?" he said.

"Finally," said Louis.

* * *

The Hidden Condo's basement reverberated with the furnace's rattle and wheeze. The three Butchers stood illuminated in the spotlight of Sebum's phone. The fox's hand, tucked inside his coat, grasped something unseen.

Then the cheetah held out her hand, stopping him. At the fox's inquisitive stare, she tapped her ear, and he nodded. Even with the noise down here, a gunshot might give them away. She kept her eyes on Sebum.

"Come over here," she said. "Slowly."

"I won't," said Sebum. She was shaking so badly that she might fall apart any second.

"You can't get away. And it'll be much worse for you if you try to run." The cheetah smirked. "Little lost sheep."

"I'm not lost," she said.

"Then why would you come here?"

"I was scared. I know what you've been doing in the black market. It's made me feel so helpless, living this close to all those horrible things and just hiding in bed all day. So I volunteered." Her eyes flicked to the side. "To be a distraction."

The smirk faded. Then she cursed and turned to face the basement's side door, only to find herself staring into the twin bores of a 12-gauge shotgun held up by the Hidden Condo's pigeon landlord. The fox wrested out his pistol and raised it and the badger went for his gun too, but the shotgun swung in his direction and he froze. That tableau was all captured in Sebum's light, the four animals sculpture-still.

"Evening," said the landlord. "Thanks for scattering all those old papers. Makes it easy to clean up any mess."

“It’ll only take one of us to finish this job,” the cheetah said coolly. The gascan sloshed in her grip. “Think you can get all three of us in one shot?”

The landlord thought it over as the basement around them thumped and moaned. Sweating fingers tightened on their triggers. Sebun had squeezed her eyes shut.

“I guess not,” the landlord said, and whistled.

The staircase behind Sebun cracked three times. A red hole opened up just above the fox’s left eye and he went down without even changing his expression. The badger reeled back, yowling, hand over his bleeding shoulder; the gascan thumped to the ground as the cheetah’s arm spasmed. She grimaced and clutched her freshly perforated elbow as a new figure thumped down the stairs with pistol raised, a slim and bandana-clad lion with a fierce buzzsaw of a mohawk. Sabu stepped up beside Sebun and gently pushed her back, keeping the other two Butchers in his sights.

“I’ve been told that one of my tenants caused your organization some trouble, so you decided to get back at him. I can sympathize with that. You look after your own,” said the landlord.

The remaining two Butchers huddled together, each keeping an eye on the guns. They still looked ready to fight. But then further shapes hulked in the doorway behind the landlord, a chiaroscuro duo that pushed its way into the increasingly-crowded basement – Ebisu the albino crow and Bogue the black bear. The former cracked his neck. The latter bared claws like pickaxes.

“Problem is,” said the landlord, “so do we.”

* * *

The Butchers across from Bebebe were uncomfortable.

The group as a whole didn’t like straying this far from the black market. The architecture was too different, and consequently so was everything else; the market’s cramped and winding slums channeled its smells and sounds, circulating them like blood through capillaries. Animals who knew how to tap into that flow – and the Butchers did, every one – would seldom be caught unawares. The rattle of a windowpane three streets down would be heard by a practiced ear. A splash of fresh blood would cut through the background aromas of meat and smog easy as a cleaver.

But here everything was too open, and all those sensations just aimlessly drifted heavenward like smoke from a bonfire. It was also plain to see in the happy, oblivious faces around them, so unlike the hard-eyed and snaggletoothed market denizens. These were animals who lived without feeling another predator’s breath on their backs.

Still, work was work. There’d be another sort of bonfire in this part of the city tonight.

The light changed and the flow of cars halted. The Butchers prepared to step forward, and then stopped. The restaurant’s doors had swung open wide.

“Hey there! I see you eyeing this place. Take it from me, the food’s as good as they say!”

One of the gators reached up to his coat, but his twin nudged him on the shoulder, shook his head. Someone stumbled out of the restaurant’s bright entryway, nearly tripped on the curb. By the look of it, his meal had been BYOB.

But then something unusual happened. The animal wouldn’t cross the street. He just stood there in the middle of it, arms loose, head tilted, even as the crossing light once again started to blink. The Butchers saw that it was a Komodo dragon, an elderly one judging by the mottling of his scales, wearing a check flannel shirt and bluejeans stained and ragged at the cuffs. He scratched at his neck, chuckling bashfully.

“Truth be told, I’ve wanted to come here for a while. But I was just too embarrassed. And just not ‘cause animals like myself ain’t often welcome at these establishments.”

One of the waiting cars honked. The lights would change to green any second now.

He said, “My grandson works here, you see.”

The soporific atmosphere of polite civilization was all around them. The Butchers had thought themselves immune to it, but it was only when the old reptile raised his head fully that they recognized the look in his eyes. Then he was inches away, reaching out, and it was already much too late.

* * *

A nondescript black car ambled through the deepening night. Raindrops shone like rhinestones in its headlights, chased each other across the tinted windows. The car granted right-of-way, stopped for every pedestrian, obeyed every speed limit. It would be very awkward if some enterprising police officer pulled it over and discovered the corpse in the trunk.

“God, I hate this season,” said Jimma, flicking on the windshield wipers. “Wonder if she noticed us.”

“She probably did, but there’s nothing we can do about it now,” said Miguel. “You mind if I smoke?”

“Save it for when we get back. Can’t risk putting the windows down.”

He braked at a red light. The Butcher’s body thumped softly behind them.

In the Shishigumi’s current degraded state, it was sometimes easy to forget that they were still predators at heart. They might not have possessed the Inarigumi’s skill at subterfuge, but they were plenty skilled at tailing prospective targets – they had, after all, snatched Haru right out from the Cherryton student body’s collective noses, and that school was practically a fortress. What had happened five minutes ago was child’s play in comparison. The snow leopard who’d been silently menacing Haru had prepared to round the corner, only for Miguel, who’d been crossing the adjacent street, to grab him by the throat and pull him back

the way he'd come. Miguel had then snapped the Butcher's neck in a businesslike sort of way, a nearby engine had revved, a black car's trunk had popped, and seconds later they were off, with Haru no doubt casting a puzzled look over her shoulder at the sudden noise.

"See how the others are doing, would you?" said Jimma. "Felt my phone going off a couple times but I didn't want to take my hands off the wheel."

Miguel grunted and got out his own phone. Sure enough, the other lions had all touched base. Agata had sent a quick burst of texts:

Agata: In the neighborhood Louis told us about.

Agata: At least I think I am. Everything's so tiny!

Agata: Kind of nice though. Reminds me of where I grew up.

Agata: Anyway I didn't see anything weird. It should be fine. Small-herbi nabes look after each other, right? Hard to sneak around.

Agata: Speaking of which, I'm gonna head out before someone calls the cops on me.

Sabu, meanwhile, had just sent a single thumbs-up emoji. His reticence extended to all communication, not just verbal; getting an animated gesture out of him was considered a major accomplishment. No one bothered to question it. He'd been with the Shishigumi longer than anyone at this point, and was entitled to his secrets – and besides, he was also their best enforcer by a country mile. Miguel pitied whoever the Butchers had sent to the Hidden Condo.

"Agata's having fun," Miguel said dryly.

"Good for him. We've been putting that kid through the wringer lately."

"Sabu's clear as well. That just leaves Hino and Dope...huh."

"What?"

The texts from Dope were brief, but conveyed a certain uncharacteristic franticness:

Dope: We're ok but things got weird

Dope: Call ASAP

Miguel dialed and the phone picked up at once.

"Miguel. How's it on your end?"

"Rabbit's safe. I'm guessing there were Butchers at that restaurant, too?"

"Yeah, about that." He sounded out of breath. "They sent a whole squad of the bastards. Honestly, I wasn't sure me and Hino would've made it out okay. But then this old Komodo dragon beat the almighty shit out of them."

"Komodo?" Miguel asked. Jimma glanced over, then returned to the road. "Was it the Dokugumi?"

"I don't think so, but who the hell knows. He just looked like someone's drunk uncle or something but he could move. Me and Hino booked it and we could still hear it going down two blocks away. Fuckin' cops are everywhere."

"Are you safe where you are?"

"For now. Planning to get back home before we get frisked."

"I'll pass the news along to Free. And be careful. There's a decent chance that no one'll know what we did tonight, but we've still kicked up a hornet's nest. The market's going to be unsafe. Moreso than usual, I mean."

"I really hope this was worth it, Miguel," said Dope.

He snorted. "Would you turn down a request from Louis?"

"Good point. See you at headquarters."

"What happened?" Jimma asked, after Miguel lowered the phone.

"Dope and Hino are clear. Some total stranger smacked down the Butchers himself. All the better for us. There wouldn't have been any way to snuff those bastards out without the police getting involved."

"A total stranger? What?"

"That's what he said."

Jimma shook his head. "That damn wolf. Free was right about the universe going screwy whenever he's involved. He's got *feline* luck."

"It'll come to a stop eventually. His and ours." Miguel looked out the window – the roads were becoming more cramped and cracked, the city's glitz swirling away as they approached the black market like water down a plughole.

"Just gotta hope it ends on a good note, then. So what are we going to do about our guest back there?"

Miguel turned back to him, grinning. Jimma gave him a look, then rolled his eyes.

"Seriously?" he said.

"Best way to dispose of a body," said Miguel. "And the Butchers are supposed to feed us, anyway. If they're gonna shirk their duty..."

"He was a snow leopard, right? Carnivore meat is so damn *sour*."

"Nothing a little garlic and soy sauce can't fix."

Miguel was the most senior member of the Shishigumi next to Sabu, and in ordinary circumstances he would have almost certainly become the group's boss after Melon and Dolph both expired. But they always voted by divination, even after Melon's election had brought them to such ruin, and their manes had all bowed toward Free. Miguel wasn't bothered by it – certainly not as much as Free himself, who bore his new responsibilities like a crucifix – but he did find himself reflecting a lot on the group's changes of fortune.

The old boss, the *old* old boss, in the pre-Louis days, had made a lot of them uncomfortable, Miguel included. He'd been way too into the "king of beasts" moniker, snatching up animals off the street and prepping them for dinner as if all the flesh in the city was his by some kind of divine fiat. It had been his idea to grab one of the Cherryton kids, a sample of that rich, plump, premium meat, and Miguel had been biting his tongue through the entire operation. Grabbing someone from that school just brought way too much heat. So when Gouhin had slugged him with a cinderblock-breaking haymaker in the Shishigumi's courtyard, Miguel could have easily laughed it off, but he'd just stayed down and hoped for the best. And now, here they were, bailing out the same rabbit they'd kidnapped a year earlier. It was probably the closest they would ever get to a formal apology.

"You ever wish the good times would come back, Jimma?" he asked.

"Good times don't last forever," Jimma said. "That's what makes them good times."

"Yeah. Guess you're right."

Watch their luck spin, end over end like a flipped coin. They had precious little left to wager with and were betting it all on every toss, but somehow they were still in the game. Miguel watched the black market close over them, and sent up a quiet prayer for that luck to continue – theirs and Legosi's both.

* * *

This was the story, as Louis told it:

When Legosi had called Gouhin to inform him of his intention to meet with Pat, Gouhin had been left in crisis. By any reasonable metric he'd already done as much for the wolf as could possibly be expected, but his conscience gnawed at him, even though he knew full well that he couldn't just march out there himself. The Butchers' meetup point was unknown, and they weren't nearly as unsubtle as the Shishigumi were. He'd already tested his luck once by going out there to save Yafya. Trying it again would just get them both killed.

Instead he'd turned to Yafya himself, who was still recuperating in the clinic at the time. Many of the Cornered Rats had come around to keep an eye on him, and as payment for his services, Gouhin had convinced their boss to lend them out to him for a day or two (and here Gouhin admitted that they were fantastic nurses as well; he was thinking about schmoozing Yafya into letting them work here part-time). He'd sent them to deliver a message to the Shishigumi.

Gouhin still thoroughly hated every single one of the Families and had bad blood with the lions in particular, but his options were limited and they'd been the best option he could think

of. Louis' influence had tempered them, he'd heard of their brief collaboration with Legosi, and he'd been there at the Day of Depravity when Free had shot Melon. He'd hoped that whatever wretched sliver of morality they'd developed in the last year would compel them to take an interest in Legosi's welfare. It was possible now to see the chain of communication here, the message jumping from Pat to Legosi to Gouhin to the lions. But then the next call was made, and the chain exploded into a web that ensnared half the city.

The lions had street smarts but they were not, as a whole, strategic thinkers, and Free was morbidly aware of the group's precarious situation. After some debate, they'd reached out to Louis for help. And Louis, who'd been in his room studying just past eleven p.m., did not get any sleep that night.

Louis hadn't bought Pat's line about a truce for a second. His brief flirtation with the criminal underworld had given him a pretty good idea of what to expect from the Butchers in terms of retaliation, and if they were able to track Legosi down and intercept him all the way from his workplace, then there was hardly anywhere they wouldn't be able to touch. He'd spent a frantic day and night placing calls, giving tips, setting up the Shishigumi's positions. His conversations with Legosi and Juno had given him a good idea of Haru's route home from school and he'd set up a tail. He'd even made preparations in Cherryton, making sure all of Legosi's friends were indoors and within eyeshot of each other. As Legosi had unwittingly wandered into Pat's snare, the Butchers were in turn walking right into Louis' own traps, and by the time he'd made this final call, nearly all of them had snapped shut.

Legosi heard all this while sprawled out on Gouhin's operating table, shirt off and pants down, wincing as the doctor cleaned his wounds. His phone was on the nearby desk, on speaker. Louis' voice dragged his exhaustion behind it like a ball and chain.

"So that's it," he finished. "The only place I didn't call directly was your workplace, Legosi. Didn't want them to close and tip anyone off. But I'm told they're safe. Everyone's safe. Haru, the Condo, the drama club, your grandfather...I don't think I missed anybody."

Gouhin felt Legosi's entire body stiffen at the mention of his grandfather. He dabbed alcohol into the holes in his back, saying nothing.

"You called Grandpa?" Legosi asked.

"Got the number from that Labrador friend of yours. He sounded confused when I explained the situation, but I think he got the message."

"Oh. Okay." Legosi stayed quiet for a long time, as if expecting some kind of follow-up question – a species-related one, perhaps – but none came. "Louis, are you mad at me?"

"No. I'm not."

"But I–"

"I'm to blame," said Louis. "I thought the Butchers wouldn't try to pursue you outside of the black market and I was wrong. They would have come after you regardless of whether you'd accepted their invitation. You did the right thing, Legosi."

“Now there’s a rare sentence,” Gouhin muttered.

“You have to go to the police. I mean it. There’s no other option now. I’ve never heard of this ‘Pat’ character, but anyone who’d throw away this many subordinates to get revenge on a single animal can’t be reasoned with.”

“You won’t get in trouble,” Gouhin said to Legosi. “I’ve got Yafya’s balls in a vise after saving him from Pat. He’ll make sure the cops treat you nicely.”

“Do you think everyone will be alright?” Legosi asked. “The Butchers might try to come after them again. Maybe even you, Louis.”

“I don’t think they’ll try to repeat this tactic after taking such a severe loss. As for myself... I’m a private citizen, a Beastar candidate, and the scion of the Horns Conglomerate. Any attempt to harm me would bring the entire police force down directly on the Butchers’ heads.”

“Real humble of you,” said Gouhin. He’d secured a plaster to Legosi’s back and just finished bandaging his gashed leg. He stepped away from the table and sank into his desk chair.

“I’m just stating facts,” Louis replied. “And thank you for your help with this, doctor. I know Legosi can be a hassle, but-”

“Don’t try to butter me up, you little shit,” Gouhin snapped. “You might have everyone around here thinking fond remembrances of the time you spent bossing those lions around, but far as I’m concerned you just put a happy face on the Families’ brutality. Prince of the Black Market, my ass. I don’t ever want to hear from you again after today.”

“Gouhin, he’s my friend,” Legosi said quietly.

“I understand,” said Louis. “Can you get Legosi to safety, at least?”

“Yeah, I’ll handle it. The police will probably stash him in a safehouse someplace until this all blows over. Or blows up, whichever comes first.”

“There is something I wanted to ask you both before you left. You said that Pat used Komodo venom on his claws. Did he seem like a reptile himself?”

“I don’t think so,” said Legosi, sitting up on the table. “When I grabbed him I didn’t feel scales. But it’s hard to tell.”

“The Dokugumi sell their venom on the side when money’s tight,” Gouhin added. “It could have ended up in the Butchers’ hands any number of ways. But I get what you’re implying. Agrippa himself always hated their guts, but he’s got a big organization and I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them are a little tired of that fossilized asshole’s leadership. If they’ve cozied up to the Butchers...”

“It’s one more thing to keep an eye on. I’ll let the Shishigumi know.”

Gouhin watched Legosi. His ears had drooped, his hands restlessly chasing each other in his lap. He'd been around the wolf long enough to know when he was retreating into another one of his funks.

"You need anything else from me, prince?" he said gruffly. "Otherwise I'm gonna give our friend here the boot before he invites more disaster on my house."

"I think we're settled. We'll talk again as soon as it's safe to do so, Legosi. Just remember that this wasn't your fault, okay?"

"I know," he said, but didn't sound convinced.

After another awkward moment, the call disconnected. Gouhin tossed the phone to Legosi and settled back in his chair.

"You're shook up right now, but the worst is over," he said. "We'll get you out of here, don't worry."

"I'm fine," said Legosi. "I was actually getting ready to break up with my girlfriend when Pat called me. This lets me put it off a little while longer."

Gouhin's mind went temporarily blank, his train of thought jumping the rails and sailing over a cliff. Legosi could insert these frank little non-sequiturs into a conversation like steel girders into a high-speed turbine. But Legosi himself didn't notice, morosely pulling his pants back on.

Gouhin said, "Since you're apparently in a confessing mood, I ought to let you know that I took a blood sample from those wounds on your back, before I started patching you up." Legosi's hands froze on his belt, eyes wide. "By my estimate, there was enough venom in there to kill you twice over before you made it to my clinic. Mind explaining that?"

Legosi looked like he did. His jaw flapped open and closed like a loose window-shutter, but the words appeared to have snagged somewhere in his throat. He was gripping his belt like he wanted to hang himself with it.

"Tell you what," said Gouhin. "Once this whole mess is done with, assuming we're both still here, you can tell me. That'll be my fee for today. Sound fair?"

He nodded fiercely and then turned, pulling on his shirt. Gouhin got an eyeful at the compress on his back, sitting in the middle of those older claw-marks. He'd have a neat little constellation of fresh scars by the time it was healed.

If there was one thing Gouhin could say about Legosi (and he could in fact say a great many things, most of them prefixed with a lot of swearing) it was that he was embarrassingly, powerfully earnest. His mind was so open that all his thoughts tumbled right out his mouth, which might have also explained why that same mind often seemed so empty. Anything that he didn't want to share must have an awful lot of baggage attached, far more than Gouhin felt like dealing with tonight. That line about his girlfriend was too much already.

I am not this idiot's father, Gouhin thought. But he still found himself putting an arm around Legosi's shoulder as he led him out of the room, and Legosi didn't protest.

* * *

Louis dropped his phone and let himself sag into the booth's upholstery. He felt awake, but a certain tingling behind his eyes and looseness in his muscles told him that if he let his guard slip for a moment then he'd pass out into his tofu-fried rice.

"All good?" Free asked.

"Yes. It's done."

This was the same restaurant to which the Shishigumi had brought Legosi just after their failed attempt to drown him – it was the closest thing the group had to an official meetup spot outside the black market itself. The décor was all paper lanterns and soft red hues, it stayed open into the wee hours of the morning, and the staff were not the type to bat an eye at a scarred and snappily-dressed lion or seven having lengthy meetups in the back tables, so long as they kept paying for drinks. Free had only ordered a single beer tonight, but Louis had handed over enough cash to guarantee them a whole day of peaceful conversation if they so wished. He'd also ordered this rice and some black tea, in the vain hope that food could replace sleep.

Free had been receiving updates from the other lions and assured Louis that the Butchers had been rebuffed everywhere they'd tried to hit. Something strange had happened outside Bebebe, possibly the intervention of a third party, but he'd have to look into that further. The important thing was that the would-be wreckers were now en route to either the police station or the morgue, and the Shishigumi had faded away like morning dew. Louis had to admit it felt a little nostalgic.

Free swirled his tongue around the dregs of his glass and set it down. "Sounds like wolffy was pretty shook up."

"I don't blame him. It's been a difficult week." He rubbed his burning eyes. "I should have made him leave that damn apartment when I had the chance."

"So what's next for you?" Free asked. "Other than getting some rest. You look like hell."

"You're one to talk."

Free grinned. "This ugly mug was hard-earned, *boss*."

"Don't call me that," Louis said, not for the first time this evening. "Anyway, I'll send a round of assurances to all of Legosi's friends and neighbors and then disappear back into civilian life. Unless there's something else I can do to benefit you all. It'd be tricky to move any more money around, but maybe..."

"Don't bother. We're past the point of cash solving anything." The lantern-light gleamed red in Free's blind eye. "The mask's come off, now. I wouldn't be surprised if the meat deliveries

stop completely after tonight.”

“What does that mean for you?”

“Agrippa and Cruce can maybe shore things up for a couple more days. After that, shit will really start to go topsy-turvy. The chips will fall as they may.” He contemplatively ran the pad of his thumb on the drained glass, tracing mystic patterns in the condensation. “Much as I hate to admit it, we lions can’t hold this back. Not after what I did.”

Legosi frowned. “What happened to the Shishigumi wasn’t your fault.”

“Nah. I ruined us, kid. Melon might’ve been a brain-damaged lunatic, but if he’d gotten away with what he did that night, the Shishigumi would’ve skyrocketed to the top of this city. Every animal in that market was cheering our name. But I just couldn’t stand it.” His voice tightened. “For a long time I’ve been the one who passes judgement on the lions who fuck up bad enough to deserve it. Ibuki wasn’t the first one I did in, though I’ll admit he hurt the most. Him and Dolph were with me from the beginning.”

“You seemed at peace with it that night,” said Louis. “Were you just behaving that way for my sake?”

“I meant what I said. Ibuki got a better end than most of us could hope for. But Dolph...shit.” His fangs flashed. “Even I’ve gotta check in with the whole group before killing a boss. Pulling the trigger on Melon like I did was beyond the pale. But to see Dolph go down like that just to make a *point*, and then watch that shithead mutant laughing his ass off in front of that crowd, covered in his blood...the *stink* of it everywhere...”

He stopped short. Louis had leaned forward, placed his hand over the one Free was holding his glass with.

“You’re going to get hurt,” he said softly.

The glass sparkled like a faceted diamond in the restaurant’s dim light, glazed with cracks. Free relaxed his grip before he got a palmful of shards. Louis withdrew his hand; it had barely been large enough to cover three of Free’s fingers.

“Be honest with me,” said Louis. “Do you wish I hadn’t left?”

“Heh. Is that an offer?”

“It’s a hypothetical.”

“Shake that magic 8-ball and it’ll come up Try Again Later.” Free shrugged, gave him a smile like a collapsing porch. “I ain’t the best one to ask that question. Right from the start I never wanted to be the boss of this outfit. But, the divinations said otherwise. Guess Dolph and Ibuki wanted me to make up for what I’d done.” He turned away, voice dropping. “I still go by Ibuki’s grave a lot. Not asking for forgiveness, really. Just waiting.”

“For what?” said Louis. “Don’t tell me that you’re expecting to die.”

“Yeah, I know the story. Felines are supposed to know when their number’s up. I’ve had that vibe for a while now, but I dunno if it’s my intuition or just the general sense of how fucked everything is.” He flexed his hand, popped out his claws. “But I’ll tell you one thing. Even if the market’s done for, I ain’t about to give it up to some come-lately dog and the faceless freak he dragged in with him.”

Louis’ phone went off. He peeked at it and gave Free a long-suffering look.

“My father,” he said.

“Uh-oh. Someone missing curfew?”

“I should get going. Our work here’s done. And you did well, Free. That’s coming from your former boss, for whatever it’s worth.” His self-effacement didn’t hide his smile. Free grinned back.

“Be careful not to lead a double life,” he said. “It’s dangerous on the wrong side of the tracks, but not as bad as standing on the tracks themselves, you get me?”

They paid their check and stepped outside. The rain tonight had been content to hold at a dreary drizzle, not enough for umbrellas, still sufficient to soak your fur after a ten-minute walk. Free let his tongue loll out like he was trying to catch the drops.

“I’m glad we got to talk like this,” Louis said. “Better than leaving it where it was before.”

He kept his tone light, as if the memories of that night weren’t still forcing their way into the forefront of his mind. But Free didn’t reply. His expression turned thoughtful, and he stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned in close. And closer. Louis had to step back before their noses touched.

“Er, what’s this about?”

“I remembered something,” said Free. “When you were still our leader, getting protection money from the stalls, you always liked to get right in the faces of the animals you were negotiating with. They caved pretty quick after that. At first I thought it was just ‘cause they got thrown by an herbivore being so ballsy, but it’s something else.” He pointed at his blind eye. “Carnivore eyes tend to be a lot smaller than herbivore ones. And your peepers are so damn big that you can see your reflection in ‘em. Lots of animals don’t do so hot under pressure when they’re staring themselves down.”

“Your point being?”

“My point is that you’re right,” Free said solemnly. “I look like shit.”

A pause. Then Louis snorted, and maybe it was just the sleep deprivation, but it quickly built up into a full belly laugh that would have gotten looks from passersby, if any were around at this hour. He tapered off, rubbing his forehead – he wasn’t used to that sort of mirth, it had left him feeling dizzy – and then faced Free, and offered his hand.

Free looked down at it. He looked back at Louis' face. And before Louis could react he snatched him up in both arms and gave him a rib-cracking hug that lifted his feet several inches off the ground. It was more intense than the one he'd given when Louis had last stumbled into the black market, but also far shorter; before Louis could even vocalize his surprise Free had dropped him again, winked, and walked off. Louis was left swaying in place, smelling like lion.

"Carnivores," he sighed.

He turned away, getting his phone back out, making the final batch of calls. He and Free headed in opposite directions, and the night swallowed them both.

* * *

Cherryton Academy's curfew had kicked in hours ago. It lay sealed in its own velvety pocket of nighttime, raindrops drifting like wayward sprites through the lamps lining its walkways. Most of the windows were blackened, save for a few dorms housing night-owls (only a few of whom were actual owls), and a single set of lecture-hall windows, bright as signal flares amidst their blind cousins.

This hall had been reserved for "exam preparation," from eight p.m. to question mark. Presently it contained the full roster of students from Cherryton's drama club, plus the canines from dorm room 701. The latter group was clustered at the lower-right end of the hall, with the other students scattered about. Few were studying, especially now. Some checked their phones, others laid down their heads and tried to sleep. The more mobile of them went up and down the desks in a slow anxious promenade, chatting quietly amongst each other, trying to wring explanations from the gossip. Juno sat in that fog of muttering voices and tried her best to tune them out.

That morning, Louis had called her and told her to bring both the drama club and the 701 canines here after dinner, and not to let them leave until he said so. Everything had already been cleared with the school's administrators, he'd said, so there was no need to worry about nosy proctors coming in and shooing them out. But Juno was his chosen agent for actually getting them there.

She had not been happy about this, even less so when he wouldn't give her a proper explanation for it, and under any other circumstance would have raked him raw. But Louis' voice had been husky with exhaustion and held a pleading urgency bright and sharp as razorblades, so she'd eventually acquiesced, after forcing him to promise her the full story tomorrow. The deed itself had been easier than she'd thought. Dropping Louis' name had been enough to rope in Bill despite his grumbling, and as Bill went, so did everyone else – his cram sessions had saved the club from the school's new segregation policies, and the afterglow of their gratitude was not likely to fade anytime soon. The 701 group was a different story. The coyote especially had balked hard; he'd had plans for the evening. But then Jack, a Labrador with the twitchy demeanor of a shellshocked hen, had agreed, and with his agreement had come that of the massive sheepdog Collot, and the rest had begrudgingly fallen in line. She'd also given Louis' phone number to Jack and asked him to call, per his instruction. God only knew what that was about.

After that, they'd stewed for hours, working through whatever diversions they'd brought along. Bathroom breaks were taken with partners. Darkness crept down the windows like ink. Juno had been approached several times for answers or status updates, but all she could do was reciprocate with their bewilderment. She only had one piece of information that could help explain Louis' cloak-and-dagger act, and it was one she didn't want to give up. Telling everyone their idolized former club president had spent a semester as a crime boss couldn't possibly end well.

She kept her phone out, watching the battery drain. The canines continued chattering in their own private corner, save for that tiny fennec fox, who'd taken off his shoes and curled up in Collot's rumpled overcoat. Bill was seated by a window with Els at his side. He stared out the glass as if watching for ghosts.

"Does anyone have the time?" asked Tao. "My phone's dead."

"Eleven-thirty on the dot," Kibi replied, and yawned.

"Man, this stinks. I'm going to be a zombie in class tomorrow if I can't get out of here."

"Lightweight," said Ellen.

"Why, what time do *you* go to bed?"

"One, one-thirty? I only need like four hours."

"Elle, that hurts," Kibi said. "It hurts me to hear you say that."

Aoba was sitting a few seats down from Juno. His head swiveled in her direction. "Any word yet?"

"Nothing. Sorry."

"He is going to get back to us, right? This isn't all just some weird prank?"

"Does Louis seem like the pranking type to you?" she asked. "Genuinely curious."

"No," he conceded. "I did see him laugh once, in my first year. Kai marked it on his calendar."

Fudge leaned down from behind her. "I don't want to be a pest, Juno, but do you have any idea why he would do this for us? Louis may have been aloof, but he always had the club's best interests at heart. I just don't understand why-

"Have you seriously not figured it out yet?"

Everyone's heads turned in the direction of that voice, which wasn't really so much a voice as a modulated sigh. Pina was two rows down and to the right from Juno, sprawled out across two seats with an open manga volume in his hand; he was the sort of animal who reverted to a semi-liquid state when at rest. His cool blue eyes stayed fixed on the book as he talked.

“It should have been obvious enough from the presence of our canine friends down there,” he said, gesturing at them. “What does everyone in this room have in common? We’re all acquaintances of that dear wolf Legosi.”

There was general commotion at this, but Pina didn’t appear to notice.

“I mean, I *thought* it, but I didn’t want to *say* it,” said Kai. “What, is it his birthday soon? This a surprise party or something?”

“A charming assumption, but I believe it’s a little more sinister than that,” said Pina. “Wasn’t there an incident last year when a certain rabbit friend of Legosi’s was abducted by black-market miscreants in the dead of night? She was taken when she was alone, and unseen. But we’re all together, in plain view.” He turned a page of his book. “This is probably by design.”

“You think we’re in trouble just because we know Legosi? That’s ridiculous,” Durham said. He turned to the others. “Who is this swishy prick?”

“Out of your league, for starters,” said Pina, *sotto voce*.

“Guys, I think he might have a point,” Els said. “Remember Riz?”

Further muttering. Everyone remembered Riz. Pina finally looked away from his book, casting a curious eye down at Jack. The Labrador was clutching himself like he’d suffered a sudden chill, as Collot ineffectually tried to soothe him.

“That reminds me of something,” said Miguno. “You guys saw Legosi a couple months ago, right? When he showed up here with all the color knocked outta his fur? He told us that he was on the run because he’d pissed off a mob boss or something. We just laughed it off, but...”

“The black market’s been an absolute nightmare lately,” said Tao. “I really don’t like where this is going.”

“Nevertheless, we must go there,” said Pina. “Ask yourselves: if whatever Legosi did was bad enough to compel our esteemed ex-president to sequester us all in this stuffy classroom for the evening...what sort of trouble do you think Legosi himself is in?”

He was met with dead silence. He huffed, apparently disappointed, and willed his lithe body back into a fully solid form, straightening up in his seat.

“I wonder, what does our current president have to say? You’ve been uncharacteristically quiet tonight, Bill.”

“I hate you so much,” Bill said through grit teeth.

“We all know *that*,” he said breezily. “Tell us something we *don’t* know.”

All eyes were on Bill now, and for a moment he looked like he was contemplating jumping through the window to get away from them all. His boisterous, often juvenile personality had become greatly subdued since Cherryton had started segregating, and no one blamed him –

for all his faults, there was never any doubt that he loved this club, and he'd had leadership foisted on him at the worst possible time. He ran a tight ship where rehearsals and study drills were concerned, but had been disappearing into his own head more and more whenever he had any downtime. Els had been hanging around him more in an attempt to break him out of that rapidly calcifying shell, but it was slow work.

"It's about Riz," Bill said at least. "I dunno what Louis thinks might be coming for us, but that bear could have handled it no problem. Guy was a brick shithouse. I used to joke about how if he got any bigger he'd have to duck through the auditorium doors." He clasped his palms on the table. "I really miss him."

Kai sprang up from his seat. "What the hell?! In case you forgot, that bastard ate Tem!"

"I miss him too, idiot!" Bill shouted back. "And Legosi, and that stuck-up asshole Louis, and not having to come to the club every day worried that I'll find a damn breakup notice stuck on our door!" He looked down at his hands as if trying to find answers in his stripes. "I miss the way we used to be."

No one had an answer for that. Even Pina's smugness had diminished somewhat; he went back to his comic, staring at it more than reading it. Juno got up and went over to the Legosi's old dorm-mates. Jack was hunched in his chair, head in his hands. The others watched her approach.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Jack said through his palms.

"Jack and Legosi go way, way back," said Collot. "They knew each other since grade school."

Jack dropped his hands. "I always knew. About Legosi, I mean. Louis told me about it when I called him. He said that Legosi was in danger and he was trying to protect everyone he knew. He made me give him Legosi's grandpa's phone number, too."

"And that was downright sacrilegious," Durham said darkly. "No one grills Legosi about his family. It was, like, the golden rule in our dorm."

Juno realized that, logically, Legosi needed to have relatives stashed *somewhere*, but until now she'd never heard mention of them. As far as most of Cherryton was concerned, it was like he'd fallen out of a particularly dour tree.

"I'm sorry for keeping it to myself," said Jack. "I didn't want to get everyone else worried for nothing."

"I won't pry, but for what it's worth, I think he's okay. Louis would have told me something if he wasn't."

Jack shook his head, ears flopping. "He's usually alright. That's the problem. I keep wondering what's going to happen when he's not. It's like karma, you know? Like he's got

this huge reservoir of bad luck built up and it's going to burst out all at once sooner or later." He and regarded her fully, tried to smile. "I get fixated on stuff like this. It's a dog thing."

"Sounds more like a best-friend thing," said Juno, and Jack's smile brightened up a little in response. He peered around her quizzically.

"Why does your sheep friend keep looking at me like that?"

"He's not my friend and I don't know why he does the things he does. Trust me, Pina's bad for your blood pressure."

"Never heard someone who sounds like they're talking and yawning at the same time," said Miguno.

"Hey, aren't you that wolf who smooched Louis after he graduated?" Durham said, leaning in. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, Legosi's into carni-herbi stuff too! Just make sure you don't bite off more than you can ch- *oww!*"

Collot had casually reached out and smacked Durham on the back of the head. "Keep it down. Voss is sleeping." His fur-veiled gaze turned to Juno. "Just let us know when we're good to leave, yeah?"

"I will. Try to get some rest in the meantime, okay? Voss there has the right idea."

She let them be. The room's chatter once again reached low ebb. Juno sat with her phone clutched between her palms like a rosary, and when it finally went off shortly before midnight, she took a deep breath and steeled herself before looking at the message on the screen.

Louis: We're clear. You can go to bed now. Apologies for the long night.

There was no way she'd allow him to leave it at that.

Juno: yeah so great news, everyone figured out that you basically stashed us in detention because the mob or something is coming for legosi

Juno: because that's what this is, right?

Juno: he made a big splash somewhere and you're trying to keep any of it from getting on us

Louis: More or less. He's also safe, but I don't think any of us will be able to communicate with him for a little while.

Louis: As I said, we can discuss this more thoroughly tomorrow.

Louis: Please send my assurances/apologies to everyone else. And thank you again for your help.

Juno: what about haru

Louis: What?

Juno: what do you mean what

Juno: is she okay

Louis: Yes, she is.

Juno: so if you know that for sure it means you were keeping tabs on her too

The pause before his next message was exceptionally long.

Louis: Suffice it to say that I've had to be thorough with my counter-measures. Haru is fine. That's what's important.

Juno: does she know what's going on with legosi?

Louis: No.

Juno: and what do you think is going to happen when she tries to call him and just gets dead air?

Juno: or if she goes to his apartment and he's not there either? what about his apartment? is that in trouble too?

Louis: Everything and everyone is safe.

Louis: From what I understand they go through lengthy stretches with minimal communication anyway. Which in my mind is not a healthy basis for a relationship, but who am I to judge.

Juno: i'm calling her

Louis: DO NOT CALL HER

Louis: I'm sorry. I know how this looks. But you have to trust me.

Louis: Just give my best to the club. And *do not* tell Haru.

Louis: I have to go, my train is approaching its stop. We'll speak tomorrow. In the afternoon most likely.

Juno: fine. i'll be waiting.

No further messages followed. She looked around the room. Several of her clubmates were watching her curiously. Her texting had become somewhat animated for a minute there.

"Was that Louis?" Aoba asked.

"Yeah, it was." She rose her voice. "Good news, everyone! We can go now and Legosi's not dead or anything."

"So he *is* in trouble," Fudge said. "Isn't there something we can do?"

Bill rose. "I can't think of anything better than looking after ourselves. Take it from me, you can't stop that wolf from doing something stupid when it gets into his tiny brain."

"You took those punches like a champ," said Kai. "Just wanted to state that for the record."

"Anyway," Bill continued, ignoring him, "what Legosi does is his own business, but I know he'd be wrecked if he found out one of us got hurt running after him. Just stay safe, everybody. And if he comes back here again, we give him shelter and raise the damn barricades." He smacked his fist into his palm. "The whole black market can come knocking. I won't give him up."

There was light applause, some cheers. Even Pina looked satisfied.

"That's our president," said Juno. "Louis will tell me more tomorrow. I'll let you guys know if there's anything interesting."

“He’s really got you running around for him, doesn’t he?” Kai remarked. He stood and stretched. “Whatever. I need to hit the sack. Hopefully this’ll make more sense in the morning.”

The students trickled around her, murmuring their goodbyes. She caught several worried glances, mouths puckering on questions left unasked. Pina was one of the last to leave, idly scratching his horns.

“I guess you’ll be turning out the lights?” he asked her.

“Seems only fair. Goodnight, Pina.”

“I’d say the night’s been pretty well spoiled already,” he said, and her eye twitched. “But I appreciate the thought.”

Juno was left alone in the empty classroom. She scrolled back up through Louis’ messages and they didn’t make her any less angry on the second go-around. She was fine being his inside source to the drama club’s goings-on, because no matter how hard he tried to hide it, his information pumping was really just his attempt to maintain some kind of connection with the only friends he’d had in this place. Just about everyone in Cherryton had loved Louis, but few had liked him. The aura of perfection he’d so carefully cultivated pushed lesser animals away like a strong gale.

But now she was acting as his catspaw – or wolf’s-paw, or deer’s-hoof, or however the stupid analogy went – over whatever shady business Legosi had gotten mixed up in, and he was pressuring her to keep it a secret from Legosi’s girlfriend. Louis had some very obvious blind spots in his evaluation of himself, and Juno had the feeling that his lingering attachment to Haru was chief among them. That all-caps command had come at her like a fist. There’d been real panic there.

Juno thought of Haru alone in her room, staring at her phone with Legosi’s display. Going to voicemail, again and again.

“The hell with it,” she said, and opened her contacts.

* * *

Go to the city beneath the city, and then go even deeper, to those arched and tarnished steel tunnels where the air mingles the scents of old and new death alike – clotted and oozing night soil, rich red flesh newly liberated from its pelt. Where the walls are suffused with a pounding heartbeat from the pumps forcing the sewage out from the city’s intestines, discharging it into the ocean where it hangs in fetid clouds. The pulse, unrelenting, could be heard all the way from Karlov’s office, and he’d grown deaf to it, knowing it only by the thump beneath his feet. But now, in the tunnels, was a new sound, and it was proving harder to ignore.

A hellacious screech echoed through the depths like the release of some primordial bird, a serrated din that Karlov felt in his molars. He stood with his hands folded behind his back and his eyes squeezed shut like a bucket of icewater was being poured on his head. In front of

him, Pat dragged his claws down the side of the tunnel slow and deep, sparks trickling out of the grooves like iridescent blood-drops. Karlov had not brought the good news Pat had expected. When the noise stopped, he waited a moment for his ears to finish ringing.

“We can assume every group was lost,” he said. “I’m already getting reports of police activity. If we include the two from earlier this week, that’s fourteen assets in total. Not an insignificant number.”

Pat brought his fist back and punched the wall. The steel dented like a soda can. He stood like that, his knuckles resting in the divots. When he spoke, his voice was eerily flat.

“I like to think I’ve been patient with this kid, but he’s really beginning to annoy me,” Pat said.

“By now he’ll probably have been handed over to the police. Out of our reach. As for going after Gouhin, I really wouldn’t recommend-”

“Forget it. He’s probably laid down twice the booby traps after he caught the last bunch and he’s got ties to the outside as well. He won’t matter much longer in any case.” He pulled his fist away. “For now, I’ve got someone else in mind.”

“Who?”

He still kept himself covered up, even down here. The raincoat crinkled as he turned. “That wolf really is dumb as a stump. Ain’t no way he could arrange a counterattack like this. But he knows someone who does. And so do we.”

Karlov stared blankly. Then, for an instant, his expression warped with loathing – and the way that smooth Doberman’s face creased around his muzzle clip was at once startling and repulsive, like lifting an overturned container to find it swarming with maggots.

“Oh,” said Karlov. “*Him.*”

“Getting surveillance on that one shouldn’t be any trouble at all, eh?” Those crocodile teeth gleamed. “Find someone who’s willing to send a message. One that splatters. I want to make an impression.”

“Do you really think that’s wise? Anyone suitable would probably have...other plans.”

“Makes no difference to me. And if they’re right for the job it’ll make no difference to them either. As for those plans, I’ve got another shipment due tomorrow night. More insurance than anything. After that, we’ll be good to go.” He walked to a nearby door, pitted and rust-slicked metal like all the rest. “Better accelerate things now that we’ve got so many eyes on us.”

“What about the deliveries? We still have quite a bit of meat in storage.”

Pat chopped his hand through the air like an executioner’s axe. “Let it rot.”

The chamber beyond this doorway was not dissimilar to the one in which Renne had spent the final seconds of her life, with the skinned and hanging corpses of the foxes under her charge. The floor was iron grate, the ceiling a crazework of dripping pipes whose origin and destination was equally unknown. There was furniture here but it was utilitarian as an army hospital – a cot, a workbench, an askew set of shelves. The bench was littered with twists of metal and wire in alien configurations, scattered bits of twinkling metal in the vague shape of animal claws, electric timers whose lights ceaselessly blinked in idiot Morse. Glass eyes of various sizes were scattered on the shelves like be-pupiled marbles. An entire leg, hammered from what looked like sheet metal, was draped forlornly over a stool. It was like a derelict toyshop from Hell, and all of it was choked with the gasoline aroma of Pat's pipesmoke.

Pat walked into the room, pawing at his snout. Karlov remained in the doorway, an art-deco silhouette against the tunnels' withered light.

"Make contact within the next day or two," said Pat. "I'll call in a little favor and handle the rest. This'll be real gratifying for both of us." A wet slurping sound came from within his hood. "Been ages since I had to think on my feet like this. It's got me slobbering again. Makes this damn thing chafe worse than ever. I have no idea how you can handle wearing it all day long."

"I don't feel much of anything, truthfully."

"Heh heh. I bet."

His back to Karlov, Pat reached up to his face. His hand came away gripping a hinged plastic contrivance in the approximate shape of his snout. The muzzle clip was drenched in drool. He looked over his shoulder and grinned.

"Let's give them all a taste of what's coming," he said. "My work is not yet done."

The snout that protruded from that hood was hairless, whiskerless, a semi-solid and tooth-studded jut of fleshy jelly the color of a fresh burn wound. Saliva pooled in its lips and fell to the floor, where it slipped between the grates and joined the city's other excretions – that pulsing, surging, inexhaustible river of filth.

What's the Color of the Next Car?

The city was hunched on a gentle slope of land with the seaside to the west and mountains to the east, as though something had raked out the earth long ago. From a distance it glittered like a heap of zirconia, a beacon that welcomed those traveling the highways which snaked from its every direction. Traffic was heaviest to the south, where most of the nearby cities were located, and the quietest roads, especially at night, were in the east, from the forested hills. There weren't even streetlights on these highways; the asphalt was lit by the travelers' headlights alone, drifting through that cavernous dark like dispossessed fireflies.

At this late hour was a lone freight truck rumbling down those lonely roads, the words *Sunsetter Produce* printed in jolly orange lettering on its sides. The driver was a middle-aged lynx whose smoky gray fur was so tangled and scraggly that he looked less like an animal and more like something that had accumulated underneath a couch, his yellow eyes shining balefully in the rearview mirror. The space around his seat contained a galaxy of crushed energy drink cans and cigarette packs, and the radio squawked and choked as it tried to find a signal. Whenever the truck hit a bump, something under the dash rattled.

He let out a bone-cracking yawn and guided the truck around a curve. The roads here would soon widen out, but for now they barely had enough room for the rare driver to squeak past his cab. The shoulders of the road were bare dirt, past which the trees shivered and shed their leaves in dampening silence. No rain tonight, for a change, but you could feel its promise on your tongue.

The driver blinked, then leaned over the wheel, slit eyes narrowing. The city's gaudy sprawl was visible on the horizon, but just a little further down the road was a police car, its red-and-blue bobble tearing apart the night. It blasted out its siren once as he approached, and then started to crawl after him. He huffed and guided the truck over to the shoulder, turned the radio off, cranked the window down.

Two officers trudged up outside the cab, a German shepherd and a lugubrious springer spaniel. Neither of them had hands on their guns, but the latter appeared to be resisting the urge.

"Evening," said the German shepherd.

"Officers," said the driver. And nothing else. The dogs glanced at each other.

"You might've heard, but we've had a problem in town lately with some illicit materials heading in," said the shepherd. "Set up a few checkpoints just to be sure. You're not the only one getting stopped tonight, trust me."

"Empty road," said the spaniel. "Not much cargo goes down here."

"I got a tip from a buddy about this route," said the driver. "Takes me twenty minutes out of my way but I save forty on traffic. Just got to make sure I don't hit a damn tree."

“You usually get here this late?”

The driver shrugged. It was an expressive shrug. In one movement, it said to the officers: *I'm in a line of work where I've got to contend with bad roads, bad drivers, wrecks, detours, and tollbooth dicks with chips on their shoulders. The warehouse guys took an hour-long smoke break because my pay's not in for another two days and I didn't have the cash for a bribe. I've got a railroad spike of a headache and enough uppers in my system to set off a Geiger counter. Can we get this shit over with so I can drop this off and get some sleep?*

“Fair enough,” said the spaniel. His partner had pointed a flashlight at the truck's logo. “What're you hauling?”

“Grain. Sorghum, mostly. It's supposed to be the new big thing but it's too damn chalky for my taste.”

“Mind if we have a look?” His face said that the trucker's opinion on whether they looked would not be likely to influence their decision. The trucker sighed.

“Just be careful with the crates, okay? If that shit spills then I'm never gonna be able to get it back in.”

“We'll watch our step. Thanks for cooperating.”

The driver tossed the keys out to the officers and the spaniel caught them. “I'll stay in here, if it'll all the same to you. This damp air is hell on felines.”

The dogs tipped their caps and stepped away. The driver settled back into his seat, watched the city's shine. The truck idled underneath his feet. His expression was blank, faintly pensive. After a few seconds he heard the truck's trailer door rattle open.

His finger moved to the radio's knob, and then further down, to an inconspicuous gray box nestled underneath. He flicked it on and its speaker crackled and wheezed before the noise coalesced into the voices of the two officers.

“...here this time of night. How the hell'd she know?”

“Must have pulled satellite data or something. That's CHIU for you.”

“Think this is it?”

“Maybe, maybe not. These roads are in decent shape. A hauler could make good time if he knew what he was doing. Let's get this one open.”

A splintering crack.

“Yep. That's sorghum.”

“That lynx is right about the taste, by the way. I tried a sorghum cake once, it was like chugging milk of magnesia. Wanted to take a damn scouring pad to my tongue after.”

"I'm not getting anything. You?"

"Nah. Let's try another."

The driver's eyes stared unblinking at the city.

"Man, there's a lot of it. It's gonna be a pain in the ass getting these lids back on."

"Wait. You smell that?"

"...yeah. I think I do. Lemme just shove my hand in here and...oh, shit."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, shit."

"How many?"

"I'm feeling one, two, three...half a dozen, at least. About the size of my palm. But I'm not at the bottom of the crate. Maybe they're stacked?"

"And there's got to be at least twenty more crates back here. What do you think the odds are-"

The driver turned off the speaker and reached under the dash. His paws ran across the plastic and caught on a small latch. He jerked it aside, opening up a recess, and from it withdrew an automatic rifle black as a tar bubble, all sinister angles. It was loaded with high-penetration rounds, ideal for punching through, say, the side of a truck trailer.

He racked the rifle and sidled onto the passenger seat of the cab, then opened the door and stepped onto the shoulder. The dirt crunched under his boots as he made his way to the officers. The woods were lovely, dark and deep.

Then, he felt a pistol barrel between his shoulder blades.

"Drop the weapon and turn around with your hands behind your head."

The voice was female, but otherwise about as warm and personable as an incoming fax. The driver's ears swiveled on his head and picked up a new heartbeat, steady and low. His nose flared. His lip curled.

"Can't believe a fucking herbie got the drop on me," he said.

The pistol's hammer clicked. *"Second warning."*

"That little heart of yours should be going a mile a minute, you grass-munching bitch. You have any idea who you're messing with?"

"I'm with Civic Harmony," said the voice. *"And that was your final warning."*

The lynx went still. His grip on the rifle tightened until the metal nearly warped in his hands. From the far side of the trailer, the officers' shoes could be heard thumping onto the road as they dismounted.

He threw the rifle to the ground.

* * *

This interrogation room was larger than standard, but otherwise the same as the others – a joyless steel-and-linoleum affair with barred windows, buzzing fluorescents, and chairs so uncomfortable they could reduce the sturdiest animals to arthritic wrecks within hours. The light through the windows was the color of nickel. It was just about noon.

The door opened and Yafya strode in. He exchanged a brief nod with the officer in the far corner of the room, a hulking silverback gorilla with a frown that could curdle milk, and pulled up a chair. He stared at the two animals seated on the other side of the table for a long time before he spoke.

"I've had nightmares about something like this," he said.

Legosi and Gosha stared back. Only Legosi had the decency to look embarrassed.

They were all in the city's police headquarters, that towering spire atop which Yafya's penthouse dwelled. He'd been convalescing in bed when Police Chief Darth had informed him, in his nervous, stammering way, that they had two fresh arrivals asking for him directly. Yafya had been all set to dismiss him and get back to sleep, but then Darth had described the newcomers and five years had immediately shriveled up and fallen from Yafya's total lifespan.

Gosha had been picked up outside the udon shop Bebebe, after an altercation with several loiterers across the street. Except "altercation" was really a polite word for "merciless pummeling," and "loiterers" for "suspected terrorists." The Butchers had been dragged into ambulances along with their gascan, twenty pounds of plastic explosive, and enough spare ammunition to turn the entire restaurant into a colander. Of the four of them, only one was presently conscious and capable of speech. The police had needed to call firefighters to hose the blood and venom off the surrounding area.

Legosi, meanwhile, had been escorted by Dr. Gouhin through the secret routes of the black market – the Butchers didn't have a monopoly on those twisty underground passages, and in his early years, Gouhin had cordoned off a section of that maze for the purpose of discreetly smuggling animals into less hostile territory, and booby-trapped it so thoroughly that anyone carelessly stepping through it would come out the other end as mince. He'd pushed Legosi off on a couple of bewildered patrol officers, namedropped Yafya, and told them to give him sanctuary at HQ. Legosi had then spent the last thirty-six hours or so in a holding cell, being subjected to round after round of polite but thorough interrogation, including a monotone barrage of questioning from a plainclothes female gazelle that had left him feeling like the inside of his skull had been scraped out with a dentist's pick. Sitting before Yafya now, he looked like someone who'd gone charging off a ledge and only just remembered that gravity existed.

Yafya hadn't spoken with either of them before now. He had reviewed their interrogation files, which were beside him on the table. Gosha had been forthright and blithely, infuriatingly unhelpful. Legosi had a lot more to offer, but there was still one key piece of information that he hadn't divulged. Yafya flipped through the papers just in case the answer had somehow materialized there in the last fifteen minutes.

"Don't bother," the gorilla grunted. "I've been at 'em since they got in here and nothing's changed."

"Indulge me, Sergeant."

"Consider yourself indulged. Can we get on with this?"

Yafya rolled his eyes. Sergeant Cromwell was a thirty-year veteran of the force, a legendary hardcase with an impressive record both on and off the field. He probably could have made Commissioner if not for his outspoken political opinions in recent years, mainly concerning the Sublime Beastar and his role in the police hierarchy. Assigning him to this mess alongside Yafya was a punishment for them both.

"To review," he said, looking at Gosha. "Two days ago, at around 1600 hours, you received an anonymous call instructing you to remain safely indoors. This caller, at your insistence, eventually divulged that Legosi was in some sort of trouble, and that potentially made you a target as well. Correct?"

"Yup," said Gosha.

"And instead, you chose to go to Bebebe."

Gosha grinned. "Damn fine noodles. Legosi kept inviting me there, but I didn't want to cause a fuss. Can't go back now, I suppose."

"Grandpa-" Legosi began, but Gosha gave him a look and he fell silent again.

"I assume you went there intending to defend the place?" Yafya asked.

"Come on, Yafya, you've known me long enough. I wasn't about to go hide under my sheets, especially if these miscreants were coming after Legosi. And I couldn't very well loiter around his apartment or his old school, but that restaurant? I figured I'd be able to put these old bones to use, if the need arose."

"Two of those 'miscreants' have yet to regain consciousness and another's jaw is in pieces," Cromwell said. "We have laws against vigilantism, you know. If it weren't for the interference – sorry, *intervention* – of the Beastar here, you'd be in cuffs."

"That's how it is," Gosha said, his voice dangerously pleasant. "Legosi's my only surviving family, officer. Best we don't speculate on how far I'd go to keep him safe."

Yafya looked at Legosi again. He was staring intently at some vague spot between his knees, as if praying for the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

“Legosi,” he said, and the wolf’s head jerked up. “This mystery caller got in touch with you as well?”

“Yes. To let me know everyone was safe.”

“Any idea who they might have been?”

“They were using a voice changer,” he said, in a carefully rehearsed manner. “I couldn’t tell you for sure.”

Cromwell’s massive fist thumped the table beside Yafya. Both he and Legosi jumped; the gorilla was the approximate size and weight of a large boulder but he could really move when he wanted to.

“Cut the shit, both of you,” he snapped. “It’s obvious that this was the work of that red deer who’s next in line for the Horns Conglomerate. You know, the one whose foot Legosi here ate? His time with the Shishigumi’s an open secret and those lions were spotted near the restaurant. Right now we have every reason to believe they’re also the ones who kept the rest of Legosi’s associates from becoming sausage meat.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” said Gosha. His face was a portrait of cherubic innocence. “My grandson doesn’t tell me much about his friends.”

“Then your grandson’s a shitty friend,” he said, and Legosi flinched. “If you would give us a statement that this deer was the one behind the calls, we could at least ask him some questions ourselves. As it stands, we can’t get within the same damn zip code as his estate without his father threatening to bury us in lawyers. Don’t you think the Butchers have already figured out who ruined their plans that night? There’s a good chance he’s put himself in their crosshairs with this stunt. You need to let us protect him.”

“From the way you’ve described him, it sounds like he’d do an adequate job of protecting himself,” said Gosha. “Unlike the two of us, here. So what’s in store for myself and Legosi?”

Cromwell and Yafya exchanged a glance. A charged moment passed, and then the gorilla made a disgusted noise and pushed away from the table. Yafya shut the folder and regarded the two of them again.

“We can excuse your actions as defense of a third party, and I’ll cover the property damage myself,” he said to Gosha. “But we are going to keep you in the holding cells until further notice. For your own safety, more than anything.”

“Don’t you live here? That practically makes us roommates,” Gosha said brightly.

“What about me?” Legosi asked.

“We’ve arranged a safehouse for you downtown. Your circumstances are unusual.” His keen vision picked up Cromwell’s eyeroll in the background; Yafya had needed to pull strings to set this up. “The apartment’s not exactly palatial, but better than anything in the Hidden Condo, at least. You’ll have a week’s worth of supplies and a few changes of clothing. The

prudent thing to do would be to take away your phone, but given the abrupt nature of your disappearance, it might cause more trouble if you suddenly went incommunicado to everybody you knew. Can I trust you not to divulge your location to anyone?” Legosi nodded. “Your front door will be equipped with a sensor that can only be disabled from the outside. If you leave, that sensor will go off, and from that point forward you’re on your own. We can’t expend resources on you if you don’t stay put.”

“I understand. I’ll keep quiet.”

Cromwell said, “And if your mysterious case of amnesia regarding this deer happens to clear up, maybe give us a call. The goodwill you built up taking out those drug dealers is long spent, kid.”

“As I understand it, my grandson’s the only reason you lot have had a break in this case,” Gosha said, tongue flicking. “Would it be untoward of me to ask you dial back the aggression a tad?”

“Gosha,” said Yafya, in warning tones, but Cromwell merely shook his head.

“We’re done here anyway. The Beastar and I have to sift through the load of shit that’s fallen in our laps over the last week. You’ll be escorted to your respective destinations tonight.”

“I’ll let you two say your goodbyes,” said Yafya. He leaned over the table to Legosi, voice lowered. “And Legosi. Your grandfather is right that we’ve gotten some information thanks to these antics of yours, but if you keep making a spectacle of yourself like this, it’s going to be very difficult for me to help you.”

Legosi met his gaze fully for the first time since he’d entered the room. Yafya was taken aback at how exhausted the boy looked. It was like he’d aged thirty years in the three months since they’d last met.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I know you’ve done all you can.”

Yafya locked eyes with him for a long time, but Legosi didn’t budge. The horse stood up stiffly and went for the exit.

“You have five minutes,” he said, and left along with Cromwell. The door latched shut, and then there was silence.

Gosha and Legosi looked at each other. They’d spoken on the phone every so often in the last several weeks – if only so Legosi could take his own phone out for a spin – but this was the first time they’d shared each other’s company since their reunion last summer. The window-side table, the alleyway brawl, Legosi casually dropping the news about his girlfriend as Gosha’s cab pulled off. Of course, Gosha had seen his grandson once more after that, wired up in his hospital bed like one of the Butcher’s bombs. The reptile’s smile now was brittle at the edges.

“Grandpa, about what happened-” Legosi started, but Gosha put a finger to his lips, then pointed around the room and tapped the side of his head. *The walls have ears.*

“Sounds like that’s quite a friend you have,” Gosha said loudly. “Whoever they are.”

Understanding dawned in Legosi’s eyes. He nodded.

“The detectives told me about what happened between you and the leader of these Butchers, or whatever they call themselves,” said Gosha. “You got hurt?”

“Not as badly as when Melon shot me. I mean, I did get shot again, but not as badly this time.”

“I’m glad you’re alright. Had me worried.”

Gosha had said it jovially, but instead of smiling back, Legosi hastily looked away. A moment later, Legosi’s lip started trembling, and Gosha realized his mistake. He placed his hand on Legosi’s own, massaging it in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

“Hey now, it’s okay. It’s okay. I didn’t mean-”

“This is all my fault,” Legosi said. “I thought I was doing something good. Instead I almost ruined everything. My neighbors, my co-workers, Haru...they all might have died because of me.”

“Haru. That’s the name of your girlfriend?”

Legosi’s voice cracked. “I wanted her to be.”

“Oh, Legosi.” Gosha’s face fell. “What happened?”

“It’s me. I tell myself that I want to protect others and instead I just hurt them. Maybe that’s because hurting them is what I really want to do.” In Legosi’s mind’s eye, Pat’s leering muzzle dripped. “And I can’t be with Haru. My record’s not going to change. So maybe it’s better this way. I should just...go away. Stay quiet.”

Gosha’s hand went still. His chairlegs scraped as he rose and walked off, hands on his hips, tail swishing. He kept his back turned to Legosi as he spoke.

“I think maybe I’m the one to blame here,” he said.

“Huh?”

“You really caught me by surprise earlier this year. I blink and suddenly you’ve built this whole new life around yourself. Makes sense you’d want to guard it.” He sighed. “It’s a reptile thing. We’re more dependent on our environment than most. The climate, the lay of the land, the animals we surround ourselves with, it’s all essential to our survival. So when we do find a place we can call home, we tend to fight for it, tooth and nail. Instinct. It’s hard to resist.” He looked back to Legosi. “I’m sorry, kid. These genes of mine just keep causing trouble.”

Legosi said nothing for a time. His fingers restlessly chased one another on the tabletop.

“But it wasn’t a bad thing,” he said at last. “Feeling that way. At Cherryton, I had Jack and the club and everything, but they never really felt like they were mine the way those places did. Like Haru did. It made everything brighter.” He got up and faced Gosha. “There’s a lot of things about myself that...that I don’t really like. But if you gave me the instinct to protect something, then I’m glad. And no matter what, I’m really proud that you’re my grandpa.”

The fluorescents hummed amongst each other. The tarnished light from the windows lay on Legosi’s face, and Gosha could see the film of shine over those beady pupils. He held out his arms, and after a moment Legosi stepped forward and let Gosha hug him. Another moment later, he broke down crying.

Legosi’s eyes had once been like any other wolf’s, round and rich and full of luster. But after his mother had died, they’d been crushed down into the familiar pinpricks that always gave him that shifty, dolorous expression. Gosha had known it was just his genes kicking in, and for years had been secretly terrified of any further mutations cropping up to torment the boy, but it had also seemed that Leano’s death had been a catalyst for the change. Something in Legosi had iced over on that day. When he’d met him again all those years later, now grown up as a brash and confident wolf, he’d thought that maybe Legosi had broken out of that shell. But now that new and mature animal was collapsing like snow in his cold-blooded embrace.

“I keep messing up,” Legosi sobbed into his shoulder. Gosha patted his head, fighting back his own tears.

“Sometimes you need somebody to make a mess,” he said. “And let me tell you one other thing: no matter what you may think of yourself, I could never, ever have hoped for a better grandson.”

That just made Legosi break down harder. He keened in the quiet room like someone learning to cry for the first time. Months of slow poison finally finding release. Gosha held him close, and didn’t let him go until he no longer trembled in his arms.

* * *

Down the hall from the interrogation room, Yafya and Cromwell were leaned against the wall. Yafya had one finger pressed against an earpiece and had spent the last several minutes listening in, utterly stone-faced.

“Anything useful?” Cromwell asked.

“Not a thing.” He removed the earpiece and put it in his pocket. “Wipe the audio after we’re done here. We don’t need to keep this on file.”

“Let’s get going. A couple of my guys will deal with those two.”

Yafya groaned. “Civic Harmony, here we come.”

Years before Yafya had taken his position as the Sublime Beastar and focused all his efforts on peacekeeping (or what some might unkindly call vigilantism), the Civic Harmony

Investigations Unit had been the nuclear option where law enforcement was concerned. If animal society depended on one thing, it was continued good relations between herbivores and carnivores. Any schism between those two groups would crack every community in half along with it, from the sleepest suburb to the biggest city. And so the central government had hand-picked detectives from cities across the nation and assembled them into Civic Harmony, which was, according to the official literature, tasked with “the investigation and resolution of egregious crimes threatening the peace between species.” More cynical animals could see how this mission statement was quite open to interpretation.

Civic Harmony had faded to the background somewhat after Yafya and his strict (or what some might unkindly call draconian) punitive attitude toward anti-herbivore crimes had taken grip of the nation, causing a steep drop in the reported crime rate. But the underbelly of animal society still dreaded their shadow. They were absolutely relentless when pursuing a case, shredding through privacy laws and petty crooks alike on the way to their goal. They were accountable to no one but Central, bypassing even the Beastar if necessary. And that second reason was why they were also feared by rank-and-file cops, because the unit doubled as instruments of Central’s displeasure. If they had to take control of a case, it was because the police hadn’t been able to solve it to their bosses’ satisfaction. Cops often shortened the unit’s name to CHIU, pronounced “chu” – because, they would say, when Civic Harmony showed up, everyone they “helped” could kiss their asses goodbye.

Yafya had never gotten much face time with them. Both they and the government had seemed content with the dropping crime rates and had left him to his own devices, keeping themselves sharp for when he inevitably retired. But he’d had a feeling they were going to show up ever since the first bombing, and that shoe had finally dropped.

Cromwell led him into a small conference room, bland and bare. The only seating was folding chairs and the only item of note a slide projector embedded in the room’s ceiling. The projector screen was down, and before it stood a slim female gazelle of indeterminate age, hands folded behind her back. She wore a plain dark blue slacks-and-blazer combo over an open-collared white shirt, her horns were polished and straight, and she had the face of someone who would not crack a smile unless paperwork approving it had been filled out in triplicate.

“This is Investigator Saya,” the gorilla said, gesturing to her. “Investigator, Beastar Yafya.”

She gave him a single nod. “An honor, sir.”

Yafya nodded back, uneasily. Gazelles still reminded him of Melon, and by the look in Saya’s eyes it was clear that she was already aware of this.

The two of them pulled up chairs. Saya’s left hand emerged with the projector screen’s remote.

“It’s just us?” Yafya asked. “I would think you’d share your findings with the entire department.”

“That is my intention. However, given your position, I believed it would be prudent to show you first. You may have questions which I can use to help fine-tune the presentation. So to

speak.”

Saya’s voice was measured and monotone. She neither looked nor sounded like someone who had gotten maybe four hours of sleep in the last two days.

“The two of us spoke briefly earlier,” said Cromwell, crossing his arms. “She’s been working with our officers to put together some kind of profile on what we’re up against. Investigator, I believe you were going to start with your little traffic stop last night?”

“Indeed,” she replied, and clicked the remote.

As Saya spoke, the images flicked past Yafya and Cromwell – a freight truck, cracked-open crates of grain, a stack of those increasingly familiar black bricks, and finally a mugshot of the driver, that lintball of a lynx, sneering into the camera. Her voice droned dispassionately over this slideshow:

“At approximately 2300 hours two nights ago, this truck was intercepted en route to the city by myself and two patrol officers. Three crates of the truck’s product were found to contain a controlled explosive similar to that retrieved from the black market several days ago. Analyzing recent traffic throughout this route, dating back to shortly before the first bombing, we estimate that anywhere between one and three tons of this explosive are currently within the city.”

“Fuck me,” Cromwell said, as Yafya squeezed his eyes shut. “I’d guessed these bombings were just a lead-up to something bigger, but even a single ton...”

“Probably enough to bury the market for good,” Yafya finished. “What of the driver?”

“He was apprehended and taken into custody. He wouldn’t divulge his name or background, but we uncovered this during his delousing.”

The next image showed a black tattoo etched into the lynx’s bare pectoral. It was a juvenile parody of an infantry-regiment insignia, displaying the number 44 within a circle of what appeared to be criss-crossed bullet casings; the bottom of this shape was tied off by two long incisors. Now it was Yafya’s turn to swear.

“I assume that’s not a counterfeit,” Cromwell said gravely.

“No,” said Saya. “We verified that the driver was a member of the Damned 44th.”

The 44th was an infamous weapons smuggling ring made up almost entirely of combat mercenaries and veterans, most of them carnivore supremacists. They’d been operating for decades, using their connections within active warzones to deliver high-quality munitions to criminal groups all across the country. Their own skillsets made them horrendously difficult to catch and even harder to interrogate. Even for Yafya, busting the entire outfit was like trying to pull the moon out of the sky. It was all he could do to try and choke off as many of their potential clients as possible within his territory.

“I suppose this explains where the Butchers’ leadership came from,” he said grimly.

“That may not actually be the case,” said Saya. “As I’m sure you know, members of the 44th seldom share details about their cohorts, even under enhanced interrogation. However, this one was eager to tell us about his latest client. They had apparently viewed him as high-risk for a while.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. They only do business with animals who have earned their trust, usually in wartime. It’s part of what makes them such a pain in the ass to catch.”

“I’m aware. And this detail was crucial when assembling the rest of our data.”

Saya set the remote down and pulled a small memo pad from her blazer pocket. She flipped through several pages. Her movements were so measured they were almost animatronic. Yafya could see her round, wet herbivore’s eyes – so unlike Melon’s – pan back and forth across each page. Then she replaced the pad and picked up the remote.

“Legosi the gray wolf’s testimony was invaluable,” she said. “Please send him my thanks, when convenient.”

“I’ll pass it along,” said Yafya. “Now, I believe you were finally going to talk about the Butchers?”

Saya nodded and changed the image again. It now showed one of the few surviving images of Karlov the Doberman, before he’d started his ambitious enterprise within the black market. This picture might have been taken off his state ID – the dog it showed was young, healthy and whole, his muzzle uncovered and sleek as silk. His expression was wide-eyed and somehow neurotic; it was possible to imagine his hands anxiously wringing together out of the frame.

“Shortly before the inception of the courier group now known as the Butchers, Karlov the Doberman was stationed in the southern tropics as a photographer for a territory dispute,” said Saya. “The unit to which he’d been assigned went missing after an ambush by enemy forces, and was presumed to have been killed in action. The smuggler we apprehended informed us that his client would often run weaponry between rival militant groups within conflict regions, as a way to build up credit with the Damned 44th. Putting this information together, it may be presumed that this animal ‘Pat’ was present on the same battlefield as Karlov, and this was where they made contact.”

“And then what?” Cromwell grunted. “They decided to get into the meat-packing business? Bit of a lateral move.”

“It’s clear now that the Butchers were just a stalking horse,” said Yafya. “Pardon the pun.”

“That would explain the Butchers’ sudden change of objective and methodology,” said Saya. “It now appears that Karlov was merely a front for the organization, with Pat waiting to seize control of it when the time came to enact his own agenda.”

“Do you have any idea what agenda that might be?”

“I might,” she said. “Please understand that everything from here on is almost entirely speculation on my part. Pat is easily one of the most elusive criminals that Civic Harmony has encountered to date. We were able to produce a sketch of him based on yours and Legosi’s descriptions, but even that doesn’t give us much.”

She clicked the remote again and Yafya involuntarily shuddered at what he saw there. The artist had done a good job – even though the pictures were little more than misshapen blobs of charcoal, that featureless raincoat blotting out everything, the shading and posture still made him flash back to his encounter in the ruined square. There was also a profile sketch showing off Pat’s muzzle and teeth, all of it slick with drool (this had been a key detail in Legosi’s testimony, he’d returned to it almost obsessively), bared in a malicious rictus.

“His age, origin, and species are all unknown,” said Saya. “We can assume that his name is an alias as well. Legosi’s recollection of their conversation portrayed him as a moderate to high-functioning sociopath with strong anarchistic tendencies. He appears to have a high degree of intelligence, particularly in engineering and miscellaneous craftwork – he suggested that his dentures and claws were hand-made by himself, and that he was also the one who taught the Butchers how to construct their bombs. He professed that the need to inflict violence on others is some kind of existential imperative between animals. That all we really wish is to do harm to one another.”

“If I had a thousand yen for every time I heard that line of horseshit then I’d be as rich as *this* one,” Cromwell said, pointing at Yafya.

“His philosophy aside, he also made repeated allusions to his age,” Saya continued. “He implied that he’s quite old. Which compelled me to chase a different sort of lead.”

Out came the memo pad again. This time she took much longer reading it; her lacquered expression cracked a bit, her lips moving along with the words. Trying to get all of her thoughts in order.

“Pat’s skillset and methods suggest that this is far from his first criminal enterprise,” she said. “Our interview with the 44th’s courier also made it clear that he’d been placing orders with them for some time. So I gained access to Central’s crime database and searched for high-profile cases in cities near recent conflict regions. And what I found was...well.”

She flipped a page, and went on:

“Forty years ago, an herbivore separatist group set off a series of incendiary explosives in a department store during peak hours. Over a hundred animals perished. Thirty-two years ago, an underground carnivore militia opened fire on a crowded square with military-grade automatic weapons, culminating with a series of explosives set off beneath the square itself. Again, over a hundred dead. Twelve years ago, an animal relaxation center – similar to B-Strike in your own city – was suddenly attacked by Full Circle, a religious extremist group that had adopted the seas’ beliefs in reincarnation. The animals within were killed by automatic weapons fire and incendiary devices, and officers arriving on the scene were intercepted by IED’s that had been planted before the attack. One hundred and fifty deaths, give or take.” She looked up. “I have others, but these fit my criteria most cleanly.”

Yafya and Cromwell shared another look. There was no hostility in this one, just a bubbling mix of incredulity and dread. Yafya himself had been informed of the latter two incidents – the carnivore militia had actually given his hardline pro-herbivore stance broader national appeal, while the Full Circle massacre was a shadow hanging over his record to this day. From the projector screen, Pat’s blackened snout seemed to twist further, leering at them all.

“Are you honestly suggesting that this guy’s been responsible for that many attacks across the whole country?” Yafya asked. “I’m aware that this is a serious criminal we’re dealing with, but it seems like a stretch.”

“As I said, it’s mostly speculative on my part,” Saya replied. “But these cases had several things in common. They all took place within one to five years of a recent skirmish elsewhere. They all involved the use of high-quality weaponry, especially explosives. And most unusually, suspects captured and interrogated after the incidents all mentioned the sudden involvement of a third party in their respective groups that had coerced them into such bloodshed. This third party was never detailed, so any mentions of them were dismissed. But, knowing what we do now...”

She sighed and pinched between her eyes, the first show of real emotion either of them had seen since walking into the room. When she looked back to them again, she spoke louder, as if apologizing for it.

“Pat stressed the egalitarianism of his philosophy during his contact with Legosi,” she said. “Between that and his insistence on concealing his own species, Civic Harmony currently believes that we’re dealing with a chameleon. Not a literal one, but a non-ideological terrorist whose only agenda is to spread more terror, jumping freely from one organization to another in service to that goal. It’s a concept that all of us have fretted over throughout the years, but this may be our first genuine case.”

“Except what’s going on in this city is different,” said Cromwell. “You’re assuming that Pat somehow oozed his way in with all these bastards and set them to killing other animals. But you also just said that he was with the Butchers right from the beginning.”

“I did. And what little information we could gain from the Butchers themselves might support this hypothesis.”

“They talked?” Yafya asked.

“Not much. Their bodies said far more.” She raised the remote again. “Aside from the injuries sustained during their failed attacks, each suspect had some part of their body missing. Fingers, toes, ears, a glass eye. One had a prosthetic foot. Another had a deep scar in their left flank, as though an entire chunk had been carved out of it.” Grainy snapshots of these injuries flickered across the screen, a tableau of mutilation. “The Butchers were evasive when questioned about these injuries, but after collating all the interviews, I can guess their purpose. Yafya, sir?”

He jerked in his seat like a schoolkid who’d been caught daydreaming. “What is it?”

“In your debriefing, you recalled that Pat first spoke to you once you’d been incapacitated by his envenomed claws. What did he say?”

The soaked pavement cold against his cheek. Muscles jelly, vision fading, every breath a jet of aerosolized acid through his lungs. His wounds had burned white-hot beneath the wetter warmth of his own ceaselessly flowing blood. And that voice, hanging over him like a thunderhead as he’d slowly died in the black market, had said:

“They’re all the same once they go on the block,” Yafya recited.

“The butcher block, one may presume,” Saya said. “Or, in other words: we animals are nothing but meat, waiting to be made equal in death. I believe that these wounds on the Butchers were an extension of that statement. They’re an ‘admittance fee,’ of sorts. New recruits had to eat a part of themselves in order to join. To view themselves as mere meat.” She glanced back as the screen, showing the warped stump of a female cheetah’s ankle. “Auto-cannibalism as a de-personalization technique. And now the everything strange about this group falls into place. Their unity of purpose, their seclusion from all other parts of animal society...”

“This isn’t a courier network,” Cromwell said, his brow heavy with foreboding. “It’s a *cult*.”

“So it seems. One that’s existed under Pat’s sway from its inception. Biding its time, insinuating itself into the vital infrastructure of this city’s criminal underworld. Yours isn’t the only meat market in the country, of course. Even Central recognizes the value of such places. But for it to be weaponized like this, by someone with Pat’s mentality?” She clicked the remote one final time and the screen went dead black. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that this is happening in the Beastar’s home territory. Whatever Pat is planning, it goes far beyond the black market. No part of this city will be spared.”

Yafya shifted in his seat and grimaced. The venom hadn’t left his system without a fight, and even the smallest amount of exertion still left him dizzy and ill. Just these two last meetings had him feeling like he was suffering a low-grade flu. And Saya’s ominous portents weren’t helping any.

“That’s extremely impressive work for only a few days,” he said to Saya. “You have my gratitude.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But now it’s time for solutions. How do we stop this from escalating any further?” He looked at Cromwell. “I’m aware of how *you* feel about my methods, but there’s never been a better time to eliminate the black market completely. It’s the Butchers’ home turf. Burn out the region and they’ll shrivel like a plant plucked from the soil.”

“You are aware that civilians live there as well,” Cromwell said coldly.

“They’ll be just as doomed as everyone else if Pat gets his way. We can deal with the fallout later, but for now-”

“I understand the need for haste, but I’d recommend against it,” Saya said. “Given the cavalier way Pat has treated his own forces, he could very well be hoping for a militant response. Even if it hurts his cause, it would stir up more chaos, and chaos is what he’s after.”

Yafya glared. “Then what’s Civic Harmony’s enlightened opinion on the matter?”

“As Sergeant Cromwell mentioned, the black market has a community of its own,” Saya said, unruffled. “And the Butchers exist outside of it. They murdered their benefactors in plain sight, and it’s left them with no allies save each other. Now that the entire district is under threat, we should reach out to the remaining crime families stationed in the region and coordinate our efforts from there.”

“You want to work with the *Families*?” Yafya stood up so fast that his chair almost went flying. “Dead foxes or not, they have more reason than anyone to keep the meat trade going. They could still be in league with these monsters!”

“That’s possible. And if so, then we may be able to determine the truth by how they answer to our request for aid.” She glanced at Cromwell. “There’s precedent for this, I believe. Members of this precinct also visit the market from time to time.”

“And that’s bad enough,” Yafya growled. “We can’t ally with criminals just because carnivores can’t keep their appetites in check. Hell, why act like Pat’s species is a total mystery? We already know he’s carnivorous. They’re the only ones who’d be capable of this much brutality!”

Saya looked at him fully then, a half-lidded stare that went on for several seconds too long. In that silence Yafya could feel himself being examined, diagrammed. He could almost hear the scratch of a pen against her memo pad.

“In my opinion,” she said, “all animals are equally capable of cruelty. Sir.”

“Thank you, Investigator,” said Cromwell, rising from his seat. “Have you gotten the feedback you needed?”

“Yes. I’ll brief the rest of the department shortly.”

“A short rest might be in order afterwards. Just my suggestion.”

“Noted,” she said. “Good day, Sergeant. Beastar.”

Cromwell went for the door in a very deliberate manner, feet slapping the tiles, arms swinging – it was like he wanted to drag Yafya out of there just from the wind of his passing. Yafya followed, and his wide-range vision saw Saya watching him right up until he left. They went to the end of the hall and stopped. Yafya breathed out. He was ready to be free of the gorilla’s company.

“Uptight, isn’t she?” he remarked to Cromwell. “And that’s me saying it. Still, it could be worse. At least Civic Harmony just sent the one animal.”

Now it was Cromwell's turn to stare. That lined, heavysset simian's face had gone still. For a second Yafya thought that the sergeant was going to take a swing at him.

"Yafya, may I have a word?" he asked quietly.

Yafya's lip curled and he forced it down again. "I was headed back to my chambers to rest. You can tag along, if you want."

"Let's."

The elevator ride up to Yafya's penthouse was more like a diving bell bound for the bottom of the sea – endless silence, crushing tension. Cromwell was so broad that even though they stood on opposite sides, his shoulder almost brushed Yafya. He stood rigidly in place, cracking his knuckles.

Yafya led him to the dining room and slumped into a chair. Cromwell took a seat at the other end of the long table. Dusk had fallen, and the clouds had thinned a little for the first time in ages, letting through a faint purplish light. The sky looked gashed, the clouds gauze over an infected wound. The carrot garden's sweet scent spiced the air.

"Neither of us liked being stuck together like this," Yafya said. "So if you want to lecture me, get it out of your system."

"Saya used to work in this department," Cromwell said, and Yafya blinked. "Surprised? I guess you don't pay attention to us like you do for those rats. She was tapped for CHIU seven, eight years ago. A good cop. I was glad to see her new position didn't break her. I told you we caught up a bit. She fought to get sent here, because of her old feelings for this place. She wanted to protect us."

"Protect us? From what?"

"From Central, you idiot," Cromwell snapped. "Do you seriously believe the rest of CHIU aren't watching our every move right now? You know how they work. This isn't just an investigation, it's a damn *audit*. And we are *failing* it. So the least you could do is keep the fucking specieism to yourself."

"Again with this," Yafya said. "If you have a problem with the way I do things, bring it up with Chief Darth."

"Darth was born with his balls clipped off. All I need is the stats. Prosecutions against carnivores have gone up three hundred percent since you muscled into our precinct--"

"And herbivore prosperity is at an all-time high," Yafya shot back. "I said it before and I'll say it again, I protect the weak. And carnivores are not weak. Look at the latest predatorial cases if you want a visual aid. If they could just keep their instincts in check, none of this would be a problem!"

Cromwell's lips peeled back from his fangs. "If things were that black and white then you wouldn't need *us* to constantly cover up your shit. I know that Darth runs all predator

offender cases by you first. Any society worth a damn would be trying to rehabilitate those animals. Instead, all we do is *bury* them.”

At that word, Cromwell’s head jerked towards the carrot gardens, still torn up from Yafya’s binge eating. He narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

“This is on you, Yafya,” Cromwell went on, jabbing a finger at him. “Not just the vigilante horseshit, but what happened with Melon as well. They might have a boot on my neck at this place, but I’m still friends with plenty of the higher-ups. You have any idea the calls we’ve gotten from Central over the Melon investigation? When we learned that he got away because you conscripted a *high school dropout* to help catch him? I had no fucking clue what was going through your head until yesterday, when we learned about your history with his grandfather. And knowing about that just makes it look worse.”

“That was a bad call on my part,” Yafya admitted. “But I’m retiring soon. As I’m sure you’re delighted to hear. I needed to start thinking of a successor. At the time—”

“At the time, nothing! The kid was gut-shot! Melon ran off into the sunset, and then he slipped away from us *again*! All because we let your whims get in the way of us doing our goddamn jobs!” Cromwell was shouting loud enough to make an echo. “As for Legosi, I don’t know what the hell is still going on between the two of you, but the fact that you’re still hovering around him proves that you haven’t learned a thing from all this. This entire department has to take orders from a Beastar that only gives a shit about his pet projects. High up in his tower, looking down on all the rest of us as good animals die!”

“You’re being hysterical,” Yafya said coldly. “But you’re right about one thing. You don’t know what you’re talking about, with Legosi or anything else. If Central or CHIU has a problem with how I’m doing things, they’re welcome to take it up with me personally.”

Cromwell shook his head and got up. The chairlegs screeched across the marble floor.

“You still don’t understand,” he said. “They’re already watching. You’d better tread lightly, Yafya. Because we’re all standing on the same patch of thin ice, and Central will be underneath it when it breaks.”

He stomped away into the foyer. A moment later, Yafya heard the elevator’s cheery ding as it ferried him away. Several rats’ diminutive shadows leaned into the doorway and he waved them off. They weren’t needed right now.

He got up, gripping the back of his chair for support. The city lights’ jewelbox shine pressed up against the windows. He stood amidst that glow, his expression meditative, and then spun on his heel and kicked the chair as hard as he could. It struck the far wall in three separate pieces and smashed into further splinters on the way down, its remains dusting the carrot garden.

Yafya coughed hard and staggered back, his hand pressed over his burning wounds. His back foot hit a planter and he sat down hard, carrot leaves tickling his scalp. His entire hip ached like a rotted tooth. This venom was forcing him to feel his age.

Cromwell didn't grasp the entire situation. Neither did Saya, or Central. But Yafya had started doubting his own righteousness ever since he'd invited Legosi into this same room, and watched him rip out his own teeth in some insane show of resolve. Looking back on it, he still thought it was a demented gesture, but it had shaken him. He'd kept misjudging the wolf and landed them both in more trouble for it every time, with his failure to apprehend Melon capping it all off. The Legosi he'd seen today had been like a different animal entirely. Hopelessness had eaten into him like leprosy.

He couldn't just wipe his record clean. Not now, especially not if Cromwell's suspicions were true. If Yafya tried to excuse a predatorial offense sight unseen after an entire career spent enforcing them, then the powers that be would oust him and probably re-instate the offense for good measure. It would never work.

But knowing that hadn't made the look on Legosi's face any easier to bear.

Hey, Beastar. Do you see it yet? Did those eyes of yours see me coming?

All those hopeless beasts, buried. What else might have grown from that soil?

Still on the floor, Yafya gazed around his penthouse. This silent, marbled opulence. The carrots' leaves swayed and rustled in the climate-controlled breeze. His head was still spinning from that kick. He buried his face in his hands, waiting for it to subside, as the skies bled out around him.

Thunder Is an Echo of Rumbling Stomachs

School spirit was in short supply at Cherryton. Behind its walls, the students were mostly insulated from the malignant strangeness that had been leaking out of the black market and into the rest of the city, but the more perceptive ones could still taste it in the air. And as usual, the weather wasn't helping. The sky overhead was the same cadaverous gray as the pavement below. It made you want to chew your own arm off just to get some color in the place. They weren't even given the relief of a proper storm, just bursts of miserable drizzle like they were being contemptuously spat upon.

However, the wretched atmosphere did have one unexpectedly positive effect. The animals of Cherryton had already been depressed by the school's sudden and heavy-handed segregation policies, and with the growing civil unrest and general malaise, many of them had decided they'd had enough. Not much could be done about classrooms, but the common areas had more carnivores and herbivores mingling than they had all year. Awkward greetings quickly gave way to cheerful gossip as the divided students caught each other up. Even the carnivores who'd been to the black market themselves swallowed their guilt and reached out to herbivore classmates whom, not two months ago, they wouldn't have been able to look in the eye.

Juno was alone. She had other things on her mind.

Under any other circumstances she would have been heartened to see everyone getting along like this, but yesterday, Louis had held to his promise and emailed her a summary of the events that had led to all of them holing up in study hall for an evening. It was written in his typically dry, matter-of-fact style, which hadn't blunted its effect any. Juno had spent most of that afternoon lying in bed and staring blankly at a wall, to the point where her concerned roommates gave up trying to snap her out of it.

She kept thinking about what Jack had said to her. A building reservoir of bad luck. Legosi's own boneheaded decisions hadn't helped matters, but it was looking to her like that dam had finally burst. This made the incident with Riz look like a schoolyard tussle – which, she now bleakly thought to herself, it sort of had been.

She was on a bench in the school's courtyard, phone in hand, the cold seeping through her coat. She kept checking for texts from Haru.

Juno had learned last year that the rabbit was a lot stronger than she let on, but Haru had taken the news that Juno had leaked to her with a calmness that Juno found deeply concerning. And unconvincing. Juno had tried to contact Legosi wherever he was, and while her texts were read, they went unanswered. She'd then badgered Haru into attempting the same (the fact that she hadn't tried to do so herself was another red flag), and was waiting for an update on that, all the while hiding her treachery from Louis herself. This was apparently what you got into when you made friends with herbivores. Embroiled in some half-hearted game of social espionage. It was exhausting.

She sighed, shivered, and then sniffed. A cloying-sweet floral scent had just wafted into her personal space. Worse was the smell beneath it. An unmistakable substrate of sheep.

She turned her head. “What are you wearing?”

“Oil of lavender,” said Pina, who’d appeared on the bench beside her like a mischievous djinn. “Rubbed just a touch of it into my horns. Don’t you agree it’s ideal for this season? Refined, yet melancholy.”

Juno resisted the urge to show her fangs. He was a philandering tool, but talk around the club suggested that Pina could be actually a decent, even thoughtful sort when the whim took him. Talking to him was still about as pleasant as chewing on tinfoil.

“Can I help you with something, Pina?”

“I was just interested in the latest about our dear friend Legosi. You’ve rather left us hanging since that evening. Has Louis sent you any more updates?”

Pina’s bored voice and slouching posture all said the same thing: *if you lie, I won’t care*. And that somehow dragged the truth out of her.

“He has,” Juno said. “But it’s all getting, you know, confidential. I’m not sure if it’d even set anyone’s minds at ease. He’s not dead, at least.”

He pouted. “Surely you can give me a little more than that.”

“Why do you care? The last time you got involved with Legosi’s business, Riz almost ate you.”

“Ah, yes, thank you for reminding me. What a stimulating week that was! But it’s not actually for my benefit.” He put a hand to his heart and smirked. “The fact that you haven’t heard already suggests that my covert activities were a success.”

“Covert? What?”

“I’ve been spending a bit of time with that Labrador friend of his. Showing him around backstage, regaling him with shop talk. That sort of thing. He’s an endearing male, if a touch neurotic.”

“You and Jack?” A sublimely horrible thought crept into her mind. “Wait, don’t tell me you two are...”

“Adorable, but no. My interests lie with females, herbivores, and most importantly, the strong-willed. He’s a male carnivore with a spine made of sponge cake. Don’t get me wrong, I’m willing to be flexible, but I must have *some* standards.” He winked at her. “You pass, by the way.”

She growled, then stopped. He’d looked away, his smug expression fading, becoming almost wistful.

“You must have noticed it too,” he said. “That’s why you approached him and those other canines. He’s shaken by this. I thought that if he gained some knowledge about Legosi’s club activities, it would lift his spirits a bit. You know he had next to no idea what that wolf actually *did* around here? He said Legosi ‘handled the lights or something.’ Everyone should know the importance of a good gaffer!” He flourished grandiloquently. “A stage without lights is like a sky without stars!”

“Were you actually worried for him?” Juno asked.

“I’m frustrated. As you indelicately put it, I nearly became an entrée because of Legosi’s last crusade, and now this. He continues to act like some hero for justice, but jeopardizes the ones he actually cares about.” His eyes fixed on Juno. “Meanwhile that oh-so venerable club president Louis, whom I’ve never even met, by the way, is hiding his nonsense from the rest of us. It seems you’ve ended up caught in the middle of it all, by chance or choice. So, if you’d spare a few tidbits of good news that I could pass into certain ears, alleviate some anxieties...well, it would be appreciated, I’m sure.”

The lavender smell unspooled from his horns and wafted around her. The depleted sunlight played in scintillating patterns on his wool. Juno had to remind herself to blink once he’d finished talking. Much as she hated to admit it, she could now see why he’d been brought in to replace Louis – or why the females of the school hadn’t collectively hanged him from a tree.

“If you want good news then I’ll spare you the bad parts,” she said to him at last. “But there’s a lot of bad parts. The short version is that he got to the police safely and they stuck him somewhere. Like witness protection, I guess. He’s been reading my messages but he won’t answer any of them.” She looked glumly at her phone. “I’ve been trying to get his girlfriend to do the same thing. Maybe the cops told him not to talk to anyone, maybe he’s just giving us all the cold shoulder. But I don’t know anything else.”

“It’s maddening, isn’t it? When you can’t tell if someone is being selfless or selfish.” He rose from the bench. “That’s why I endeavor to never think about anyone but myself. It makes things so much easier.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

“What about Louis? Do you believe he’d have any more luck?”

Juno considered it. She’d been a latecomer to whatever odd drama had been going on between them in the club, but from she’d seen and heard, Legosi almost worshipped the ground Louis walked on. And possibly vice-versa. To say nothing of the insanity that had gone down between them in the black market.

“He might,” she concluded. “But I’d have to convince Louis to contact him. And he can be even more stubborn than Legosi.”

“What a pair,” Pina said dryly. He raised his arms and stretched, his silhouette a slender ivory-capped arc. He really was *offensively* good-looking, Juno thought, and then pounced on that thought and tore it to ribbons. “Here we are again, hm? A storm of trouble is bearing

down and those two are right at the center of it. If you make any headway with either of them, you know where to find me.”

Juno watched him sashay off, tail swinging with his hips. There wasn’t much time left until the next bell. She delicately chewed her lip, and then decided to risk it.

Fifteen minutes after Louis had instructed her not to tell Haru anything, Juno had told her everything – the entire dismal story, with all the necessary context. And that included Louis’ relationship with the Shishigumi. She wasn’t sure if Legosi had already let that gem slip out himself at some point, but Haru had taken it with the same eerie calm as the rest of the news. She’d thanked her and then gone silent. This was the first time Juno had messaged her since that night.

Juno: haru it’s me

Juno: how have you been

Juno: listen i didn’t want to stick my nose into this but i really think you should call legosi or text him or SOMETHING. louis said he’s ok but he’s freezing me out and i don’t know what to do

Haru: Hello, Juno. I already texted him.

She almost fumbled the phone. Haru had replied within seconds.

Juno: and? good news???

Haru: He read my message right away but he hasn’t replied.

That increasingly-familiar tic went off beneath Juno’s eye. This clueless canine was making her want to scream.

Juno: i’m mad

Juno: can i be mad?

Juno: i’m going to be mad for you

Haru: For what it’s worth, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know that we know he’s reading our texts. He’s still not 100% sure how cell phones work.

Juno: he’s being an idiot! the fact that he’s a bunch of different kinds of idiot doesn’t help anything! idiocy doesn’t cancel itself out!!

Haru: Haha.

Haru: But it’s okay, really. I’m not upset.

Juno: you should be!!!!

Haru: Mostly I’m worried for him. Even though you told me he’s safe from those butchers or whatever they’re calling themselves. I can sort of understand why he doesn’t want to talk to us.

Haru: I think he’s ashamed that he made us worried.

Juno: well i’m feeling pretty worried right now anyway

Haru: I know. And he probably knows that too, so he just keeps stewing on it and feeling worse and worse.

Haru: I’m not sure if you noticed during the time you spent around him, but Legosi gets depressed really easily.

Juno: big sad wolf

Haru: Yes.

Haru: He's the most self-sabotaging animal I've ever met. Almost every time I tried to cheer him up he'd find a way to crush it. It's like he spends all his free time searching for reasons not to be happy.

Haru: I think that's part of the reason he's so impulsive. It means that he doesn't have to spend as much time trapped in his own head.

Haru: So if he's stuck in some safehouse somewhere, not allowed to leave, and he's not reaching out to anyone and all those thoughts are just chasing each other all day then

Haru: Ok never mind I'm upset

Haru: I'm really really upset

Haru: Why won't he talk to me, is it something I did, was there something I should have done

Juno: whoa alright, breathe

Juno: 3 secs in, 3 secs out, 3 times

Juno: better?

Haru: A little.

Juno: old trick for stage fright, never fails

Juno: i was actually just talking to pina and he suggested dragging louis' butt into this mess too

Haru: Who?

Juno: oh right you never met him. he's a dall sheep who replaced louis in the drama club. basically picture louis but ten thousand times more aggravating

Haru: That sounds...bad.

Juno: he's actually a pretty decent guy, he's just also the absolute worst in every possible way

Juno: anyhow

Juno: there's a chance louis might bust legosi out of his shell if you'd like me to annoy him into doing something about it

Haru: No. I'll talk to Louis. This was long overdue.

Haru: I'll try not to say anything that might get you in trouble.

Juno: oh no, please, don't hold back

Juno: just leave a couple pieces for me to gnaw on afterward

Haru: I'll keep that in mind.

Haru: Thanks for all this, Juno. Really.

Haru: I wish we'd been better friends before I graduated.

Juno: well it's not like you're a million miles away or anything, maybe we can catch up when everything feels like it's not about to explode

Juno: let's just get that stupid deer and that stupid wolf straightened out

Juno: they're so stupid, haru

Haru: They can be.

Juno: they're stupid and we're in love with them and that makes us stupid too

Juno: everything is stupid so much

Haru: Ok ok I'm smiling now, mission accomplished.

Haru: I'm letting you go.

Juno: have fun

Juno looked up and found herself alone in the courtyard. It was already halfway through next period. What was she missing, anyway? History? Calculus? It all felt so quaint lately. Maybe

the school staff felt the same way; normally someone would have gotten on her case by now for playing hooky.

In her early days here, she'd pinned Louis to the ground and swearing to usurp his position as the next Beastar. The locus point that held up the morals of animal society. It would have been sad if it wasn't so funny. Right now she was at the intersection of just three or four animals and already felt her shoulders buckling under the weight.

She rose from the bench and stretched her stiff back. If she was careful then she could probably sneak into the next class without anyone noticing, especially given how chaotic the carnivore-only classrooms tended to be.

Something had to be done about this segregation, she thought. It was already hard enough to bring one another together, even during times like these. Juno thought one last time of Legosi, sequestered at some unknown address and sealing himself inside his own head, and she glared up at the clouds with their ever-present threat of rain, daring them to burst open.

* * *

The city's authorities had tried to renovate the black market back in the day, but that had been short-lived. Contractors had charged usurious hazard fees, bureaucrats had backbit each other bloody at every turn, and the Four Families had sent increasingly impolite warnings not to try and gentrify their territory. Nowadays the only relic of that folly was a sprawling half-finished construction site at the edge of the market district, almost on the precise opposite end of the main entrance, and the only reason this site still existed was because it had been colonized by the Dokugumi.

Each of the Families dabbled in whatever rackets they could get their claws into, but they all had specialties. The Shishigumi were big into gambling and the livestock trade (the latter of which had been no small irony when Louis was in charge). In their prime, the Madaragumi had maintained chief control over the drug trade, especially Silvervine. Renne and the Inarigumi had monopolized prostitution, though this was more of a cover for the ruthless coalition-building that had eventually resulted in the Butchers and all the ruin that followed.

The Dokugumi were more direct. Their ersatz-junta look wasn't entirely a façade; as a unit, they were by far the most vicious fighters in the black market, and not just because a single bite was enough to put down most animals for good. Agrippa kept an iron grip on the movement of weapons throughout the city, and it was even rumored that he had an inside connection with the Damned 44th itself. This, it was generally assumed, was why he was so livid at the Butchers destroying the black market using such high-class munitions. It was a betrayal in more ways than one.

In keeping with their military stylings, the Dokugumi also didn't have a single set headquarters. Instead they moved from one defensible area to another, hollowing them out and establishing footholds. No one was sure of how many times they'd changed location, but they'd been at this construction yard for several years, creating shacks out of sheetmetal and tarpaper, sleeping rough with generators and space heaters to keep their cold blood from moving too sluggishly. None of the reptiles were interested in the soft life; even Agrippa's private chambers were a glorified barracks. The important thing was that anyone trespassing

on this yard would be exposed from a dozen different directions, and if an opposing army broke down the gates, the Dokugumi would have a dozen avenues of escape.

Right now the lizards, three dozen strong, were assembled in two parallel rows down the center of the site. Some nervously fingered their masks or their shawls, but most were stock-still and silent. Their bunks were located in a heap of rusted scaffolding and rotting canvas that marked the city's abortive attempt at a condo building; from the depths of that structure could be heard the sound of a slamming door. Zeke stepped out of its depths and stepped into rank with the rest of them. Agrippa followed, and they all stood to attention.

He walked between the rows, burying them in his shadow. His face was as set and austere as a cliffside. He paused in front of one lizard and wordlessly held out his hand. The lizard hurriedly fumbled out a small pouch and gave it to him, and he lifted it to his nose, sniffed once, and handed it back.

"Still not bitter enough," he said. "Adjust the blend. Pour turpentine on it if you have to."

"Yes, sir."

"As you were."

He turned in place, locking eyes with each of his subordinates in turn. When he spoke again, he raised that weak voice as best as he was able. One other advantage of this place – the yard's acoustics let him be heard by all.

"The deliveries are now over," he said to them. "No more meat will enter this market so long as the Butchers still breathe. And so it is left to us. While the other Families played their little games, we prepared. There's enough meat in our private stores to last the smaller vendors about three days, if they practice moderation. But will they do that? I don't believe so." He shook his head mournfully. "We are surrounded by dumb animals, slaves to appetite and superstition. The Dokugumi are better than this. We've only ever had one desire: the preservation of the black market, and the order it represents. And for that reason, when all of this is over, we will stand as its rightful inheritors.

"We're in freefall now," he said, louder, turning on his heel. "There is nothing to do but continue to the very bottom. I will do everything in my power to ensure that we have a reason to climb back up. And everyone who cast us down will get dragged in right along with us. The Dokugumi will have their revenge on every wretched creature who brought such chaos into our midst! Are you with me?!"

The site trembled with the Dokugumi's response: "*Yes, sir!*"

"So be it," Agrippa said, and spat cloudy fluid onto the pavement. "Let's keep this place on life support for just a little longer, and show our enemies how potent our venom really is."

There wasn't any cheering, despite the lizards' unanimous show of approval. They just shuffled their feet and eyed each other, shivering a little in the chill. As Agrippa stepped up to Zeke, the young lieutenant's sleepy gaze now just looked tired.

“Do you still trust everyone here?” he asked, and Zeke nodded. “Get the two you trust most and bring them to my quarters. We need to speak.”

The lizards slowly dispersed as Agrippa returned to his shelter. Outside, the black market had opened for business several hours ago. The stalls were bare. It had begun to starve.

* * *

Once upon a time, the Madaragumi had been famed as the artists of the Four Families. The leopards defined themselves through the markings on their pelts, and weren't shy about decorating themselves further. Their *hitatare* usually covered up dazzling tattoos threading through their spots, and most of the major parlors in town knew every one of the leopards by name. Their hideout was likewise marked, a derelict apartment building whose surface was crazed by graffiti, with each member of their gang adding their own piece with little care for internal consistency, so that the pitted concrete was a garish kaleidoscope of curled serpents, sharptoothed cats with opal eyes, bloodied blades, thunderbolts, ribbons of blue fire. This was all before Cruce had lost his edge and the gang had been forced to devote all its energy to simple survival, so now most of that graffiti was woefully faded, the color leached away into its dreary surroundings.

The inside of the hideout was a crowded and filthy warren redolent with the smell of Silvervine smoke – Cruce wasn't the only one who'd gotten enthusiastic about self-medicating. No one was stoned today, though. They were too stressed to bother. They'd gotten the news about the Butchers cutting them off, and worse besides. The leopards had consulted among themselves as to who should break the news to the boss, and the volunteers were on their way to his room now, a shabby makeshift suite created by smashing down the adjoining walls for two apartments on the top floor. The two of them ascended the stairs, swords at their side. The Madaragumi never let go of their swords, no matter how chipped and crummy they might be. They were animals bound by tradition.

The first volunteer, Diego, had been expected to go up; he'd been the de-facto leader of the gang for weeks now, ever since Cruce's deterioration had really kicked into high gear. He was more solidly built than the others, defined by a ragged scar that cut across the upper and lower lip on one side of his mouth, giving him a permanent snarl – the result of a lucky knife strike by Zeke the Komodo dragon some time back. Stern, solemn, and perpetually sober, he'd been shoring up the deprecated gang without complaint, and today was no different. His companion, Roco, was slimmer and twitchier, hitching his robe's shoulder up every couple of seconds. Roco was one of the youngest leopards, and really hadn't known what he was getting himself into when he'd joined. Most of his fellows were surprised and a little impressed that he hadn't abandoned ship yet.

“You don't have to come along,” Diego grunted as they went up another flight. “I can handle this myself.”

“I just thought it'd be good to have some backup. In case he, you know...”

“He won't. Cruce has never raised a hand to us. No matter how bad things got. Didn't you know him before?”

“I joined around two years back. He was on the Vine pretty much 24-7, then.” Roco’s tail swished anxiously.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Diego sighed. “I wish you could’ve met him in his prime.”

Cruce’s door was shut. Diego approached it and knocked, Roco staying a few careful paces behind.

“Boss? It’s Diego. Got news for you.” No answer. “Boss?” He tried the door and found it locked. “Shit.”

“Should we leave him alone?” Roco asked.

“No, this is too important. Boss, I’m coming in! Sorry about the door!”

He gave the knob a hard twist and the worm-eaten wood cracked and puffed dust. He pushed it open and stepped inside, one hand on his blade. Cruce’s room was a wreck, littered with takeout containers smeared with mucoid patinas of ancient grease. A few lonely candles by his filthy bed didn’t clear the darkness so much as twitch it aside, the shadows always pushing back in like fog. Diego and Roco’s night vision swam as they tried to locate Cruce in this sty.

He was sprawled by a closet with sword in hand, naked from the waist up. His head lolled and his eyes were heavy-lidded and dim. A bundle of grey-green leaves lay at his side. Diego swore again at the sight of them.

“Silvervine again?” Roco said timidly.

“Looks like it. But that shouldn’t knock him out like this.” He picked the plant up and took a cautious whiff. “He’s dosed it with something else. Opium, maybe, who the fuck knows anymore.”

“You want me to...poke him, or something?”

“Better idea.” He knelt beside Cruce and smacked him across the chops, hard enough to make Roco wince. Cruce jerked and shivered, eyelids fluttering open. One eye was still mostly swollen shut from the beating he’d taken two days ago; it took a few seconds before the light of recognition sparked in the other.

“Oh,” he said. That single syllable carried such a freight of misery that Roco felt it like a spike in his heart.

The other Families had glimpsed Cruce’s reaction to Renne’s death, but they had no idea how bad it had really gotten. The Madaragumi’s boss had already been spiraling the drain with increasingly alarming speed, but when news of her demise had reached their headquarters, he’d wailed with such phantasmagoric intensity that several of them had run out into the night with hands over their ears. The night of his meeting with Free and Agrippa, Diego had checked on him to find him lying in a puddle of his own blood. He’d tried to commit

seppuku, but his arms had been shaking so badly that he'd only succeeded in gashing his side.

Cruce was a shared burden among the Madaragumi. They'd all resolved long ago to sink with him if necessary. And that weight was becoming a heavy one indeed.

"The meat's all gone," Diego said. "No more deliveries. Have you heard?"

"Lizards told me," Cruce slurred. "Called. Can't get away from it."

"We checked our stores. If we distribute it, then we can--"

"Just do it. Doesn't matter how much time. Won't help anyway." He tried to rise and slumped back against the wall. Whatever he'd inhaled had jellied his already-fragile muscles. Roco cleared his throat and tried to make a contribution.

"Boss, there's something else," he said. Diego gave him a reassuring nod and he pressed on. "The cops stopped us when we were on patrol. Plainclothes. They want our help with this Butchers thing."

"Cops?" That word seemed to drag Cruce's clouded brain a little closer to earth. "No. No cops."

"It's not just them either. Civic Harmony's getting involved. We don't think it's a trap. Maybe if we--"

"No, no, no. Doesn't matter. Won't help." His head shook and spasmed. "Agrippa. Always watching. You'll die if you try."

"Okay, Cruce," Diego said soothingly. "You're still in charge. No cops."

Cruce took a shuddering breath and tried once again to sit upright. This time he succeeded. The candlelight danced over his wasted tattoos, his bruised and blooded face. Even his spots looked faded. Like he was dissolving into smoke.

"If I'm in charge then you've gotta listen to me. You gonna listen?" They nodded. "Take the others. Get out of the city. Fast and far as you can. Leave me and just go."

"Not happening," Diego said bluntly.

"You were gonna listen. You said." His voice had turned wheedling.

"I know. But we can't just abandon you to these bastards. Not after all this." Diego glanced at Roco. "Even the kid's stood his ground."

"I don't think I could run," Roco said. "I'd have nightmares of what they'd do to you if they caught you alone out here. You don't deserve that, boss."

Cruce laughed then, a rasping chuckle that made them both shiver. No one in the Madaragumi could remember the last time he'd laughed at anything. He held up his katana

and drew it from its sheath, just enough for the blade to glint in the greasy candlelight.

“This sword belonged to the old boss,” he said. “And to the one before him. You know what makes it special?” They shook their heads. “Not a damn thing. It’s the same cheap piece of shit as the other ones. Barely holds an edge. But the old boss said to me I’d hold on to it no matter what, just ‘cause it used to be his. And he was right. I’ve never let it go.” He sheathed the blade. “He said nostalgia is the Madaragumi’s curse. We cling to what was. Helplessly.”

“That’s why we have to stick together,” Diego said. “We’re no better than you, Cruce.”

“Down at the smoky bottom.” He let out a hacking sob. “Renne. Oh, Renne.”

“Did you love her?” Roco asked.

The question had leapt out of his throat before he could snap his jaws shut around it. Diego shot him a killing look, but Cruce merely bowed his head, his swollen eye leaking tears.

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “But I wanted to try.”

Diego rose. “We’ll distribute the meat, Cruce. Just lay off the Vine, okay? Whatever happens, you need to keep your strength up.”

“Take it. Doesn’t do anything anymore.”

Diego grabbed the leaves and walked off, gesturing for Roco to follow. He let Roco take the lead on the way out, and when they were halfway down the hall, he punched the young leopard in the back of the head so hard that he saw stars.

Cruce didn’t move from where they left him. He hugged his sword to his wasted chest. Useless relic that it was. His greatest blow had been struck with his bare claws.

She’d come to him with her ruined eye freshly patched and the other one glittering with a fascination that was close to hunger. She’d laughed off his threats and shown him the secret parts of the market, the dark corners within the dark corners, a fractal geometry that no one else had ever known. For the first time in such a long while, he’d felt relief. A parting of the narcotic fog that had been dissolving his body and mind. But that ill weather had returned with a vengeance the night of the first explosion, and he’d hidden himself away until the irrevocable had happened. Cruce sweated out the poison that he’d used to fill his head, and felt his subordinates’ loyalty bear him up like a side of beef on a hook.

* * *

Louis had made a mistake.

When he’d gone through with his plans to sequester his former clubmates, he’d known there would be risks involved in using Juno as his pawn. She was empathetic enough to play along if he made it clear it was for the good of her friends, but smart and willful enough so that she wouldn’t just blindly follow orders. If he pushed too hard, or too unsubtly, there would be consequences. He’d believed that he’d done a pretty good job of drip-feeding her enough information to keep her out of his antlers for the night, but when she’d threatened to call

Haru, he'd fired off a white-hot command to keep her mouth shut that he'd regretted the instant he had pressed Send.

He still didn't know why he'd reacted so badly. Some scrap of sentimentality that hadn't totally decomposed yet. But he'd known at that moment that he'd gone too far, and had been waiting for the other shoe to drop ever since. So when he'd been in his room, staring blankly at his Statistics homework, and his phone had gone off and displayed a familiar number, he'd answered it in the manner of someone climbing up to the gallows. And so far, the conversation had pretty much gone as badly as he'd expected.

He was hunched in his seat, back turned to his desk. The pain in his leg was a thumping counterpoint to the dull ache in his head. He didn't dare try to get a word in edgewise.

"I was fine with you not wanting to talk to me. We drifted apart. It happens. You live your life, I live mine. But now these freaky gangsters are everywhere, Legosi's gone, and Juno tells me you're mixed up in all of it. The least you can do is call him!"

"Haru, what good would it do?" he asked. "You didn't hear him when I got in touch that night. I commiserated with him as much as I could and he barely spoke to me. He needs to rest. If that means keeping away from us, then so be it."

"He's not like that and you know it. The last thing Legosi needs is to be alone with his thoughts."

At least there'd be plenty of extra space, Louis thought, and then hated himself a little for thinking it. "You said that you already tried it yourself. He didn't answer."

"But he would if you reached out to him. It pisses me off that I need to ask my ex to get my boyfriend to talk to me, but that's where we're at right now. Help me, Louis. Please."

"I think you vastly over-estimate my influence on him," he said.

There was a long silence after that, so long that he straightened up in his seat, thinking that Haru's connection had dropped. But then she spoke again, and her voice was like the wind off frozen steppe.

"Louis. You got involved with those lions from the black market, didn't you?"

Now it was his turn to stay silent, jaw hanging slightly, eyes saucer-sized. He'd gone over this nightmare scenario in his head dozens of times since he'd left the Shishigumi – it had, in fact, been the chief reason why he'd ghosted Haru completely – and now it had sideswiped him like an oncoming truck.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find out?" Haru asked. *"I knew one of those Butchers was tailing me before. I'm pretty sure I even bumped into him on my way home! What, did you figure these ears were just for show? And I smelled lion after he disappeared. I'm never going to forget that smell. Not after that night."*

"Haru...I didn't..."

“Legosi left that part out when I made him tell me everything about Riz. I had to drag it out of Juno yesterday. So don’t blame her, either.”

“I can explain,” he said desperately. “At the time, I was...I can’t say that I was under a lot of pressure, though it’s the truth, that hardly excuses it, but my identity, I mean in the existential sense, things were so *confused* and I had to come to grips with it. It sounds pretentious, I know, but I went out to save you on my own that night and I just got caught up in-”

“For God’s sake, Louis,” Haru sighed. “I don’t care if you joined up with that gang.”

He stopped short. “What? But they tried to eat you!”

“Yeah, so did someone else. I’m dating him, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Don’t be so damn casual about this! If you’re not angry then why bring up in the first place?”

“I was actually relieved when I found out,” she said. “You were always so lonely. Even when we were in bed together, I never felt like I could get close to you. I wanted you to let somebody in, even if it wasn’t me. As for the whole eating-me thing...well, it was their boss who did that. If you took over their gang, I can guess what happened to him. But you’re wrong. I’m definitely angry.”

“If this is about not calling Legosi again-”

“You got him involved in this.” She’d gone cold again, the words icicles stabbing his ear. *“You’re not allowed to hide from that.”*

“He got *himself* involved,” Louis shot back. “He’s the one who couldn’t stop meddling in the black market. I told him that first day he’d put a bullseye on his back.”

“But he didn’t, did he? This didn’t start going out of control until he went back into that place. And he only went because you told him about what was happening there.”

“I was trying to help him!”

“No. You were trying to help the lions.” She spoke with leaden certainty. *“If the black market’s going to hell, then that means they’re in trouble. And you had to make their problems your problems, which meant you had to make them his problems. It makes sense you’d want to help your friends. What I don’t get is why you’re in denial about it like this. Just admit that you care about somebody for a change!”*

She didn’t know what she was talking about. Her facts were wrong, or at least she was looking at them from the wrong angle. He wanted to say that, but his treacherous brain short-circuited the words on the way up his throat. Instead he remembered the pang of delight he’d felt when Legosi had brought up Yafya’s money that day in the restaurant. Fifteen million yen, funneled toward the Shishigumi in Legosi’s name. He was very sure that Haru did not know about this, and that if he told her then the consequences would be cataclysmic.

Nor did she know about the long nights he'd spent replaying that meeting with Free in his mind. Wondering how to make amends, regret twisting through him like barbed wire.

"Legosi looks up to you so much," Haru said, quieter now. "It almost makes me jealous sometimes. Around me he's always walking on eggshells."

"That's his fumbling attempt at self-improvement, I think. He's trying to keep himself in check. With how impulsive he is—"

"Yeah, and you enable it. You say jump, he jumps. There's responsibilities to being friends with someone like that, Louis."

"You're right." His leg ached so badly. "Of course you're right."

"Call him. Please. I want to be there for him, but he has to let me try."

"Give me some time," he said. "A day at most. I need to think about what to say. If I come on too strong then he'll close me off and we'll be totally without recourse."

"He's gotten so distant because of this damn predation offense. It's all he talks about when we're together," she said ruefully. "I'm not blaming you for that either, by the way."

"Unfortunately, I don't believe his legal situation is something we can empathize with. We're herbivores, after all." He looked out his bedroom window to the sweeping grounds of his estate. "I really need to find out who to bribe to make that mark go away. But for now, I'll cajole him into allowing us to provide emotional support."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Haru. About the secrets. About everything."

"Apology accepted. But you need to open up too, Louis. You deserve better than what you're giving yourself."

He smiled wearily. "You do know how to make an animal feel self-conscious."

"Hyper-awareness. It's a rabbit thing," she said. "Anyway, I'll wait to hear from you."

"Yes. I'll be in touch."

He ended the call and went limp in his chair. It took him a minute to catch his breath. By the time he'd enrolled in Cherryton, Louis had thought he was more than prepared to breeze through whatever trivial adversities a boarding school could offer, and for the first two years, he'd been right. Then he'd sidled into the school gardens to hide an inconvenient antler-shedding, and met a dwarf rabbit who'd bulldozed through all his defenses with effortless ease. Haru had a more forceful personality than most carnivores he'd met, and leaving Cherryton apparently hadn't softened her up at all.

Responsibilities, she'd said. Somehow he'd made himself responsible for a score of animals across two separate lives. So many obligations to meet, so little time.

He needed air.

Louis put on his shoes, double-checked his prosthetic's straps, then put on his coat and stepped out. The halls of his manor were library-silent and suffused with somber gray light; it made him feel like he was walking through a mausoleum. He'd made it all the way to the foyer before hearing the frantic tap-tap of tiny heels on the marble floor.

"Master Louis!"

The family butler Yuta trotted up him, gloved hands wringing. The two of them weren't exactly close, but Louis did feel a twinge of regret for the poor fellow. He was trapped between indulging Louis' willfulness and ineffectually trying to enforce Oguma's curfew, and the stress was enough to make him shed his wool.

"Don't worry, Yuta, no more late nights for me. I'm just taking a stroll around the city. Back before sundown."

"I understand, but your father objected most strongly to leaving the estate without his approval. Especially with all the predation incidents happening around town!"

"Where is he now?"

"He stepped out for the afternoon," said the butler, already defeated. "But he'll be back quite shortly. If you would only-"

"Let him know that I would be thrilled to hear all of his 'objections' in person once I return. In the meantime, I'll be sure to confine my wanderings to uptown. No shortage of police around there."

Yuta groaned. "As you say, Master Louis."

* * *

He had no destination in mind. He took the train just one or two stops – no reason to unduly stress his leg – and wandered not far from Center Street, where Legosi had made his final, abortive attempt to capture Melon. Though he didn't keep *that* close. Center Street was worryingly near to the black market. It was bizarre, now that he thought about it. That rotten district's influence seemed to defy conventional space.

He tucked his muzzle into the collar of his anorak, checking periodically for rain as he walked. Next order of business was to contact Legosi. A trickier bit of diplomacy than one might assume. Haru had said that the wolf was putty in his hands, but Louis remembered when they'd spoken in the restaurant and Legosi had flatly refused to leave. It had been like a shutter had dropped in his mind. Louis had to avoid tripping those alarms again. Maybe reverse psychology was in order. Make it seem like it'd be an act of resistance to speak to his damn girlfriend like somebody with a lick of sense.

Louis grimaced and massaged his scalp, near where his antlers were rooted. This was making his head spin.

Herbivores and carnivores alike had their little social challenges, but Legosi was some infuriating outlier from both, too introverted for a canine but so weirdly passionate that he couldn't be anything else. And then there was that body of his – he was ridiculously strong even for a gray wolf, even before he'd cut his teeth in the black market. For a while it seemed like he'd started to make peace with that, but he'd overstepped himself. The Butchers weren't a problem you could punch away. If the way he'd sounded two nights ago had been any indication, learning this had made Legosi's old neuroses flare up all over again.

Louis snapped out of his reverie and looked around. The flow of pedestrians around him had been oddly diverted. Everyone going around the corner of the next block. He followed them, had a look, and hissed air between his teeth.

The police had only covered up the bodies so far. They lay under black tarps, three of them, the shapes beneath vague enough so that their species was impossible to determine. Peering between the heads of the gathered crowd he could see the blood splashed on the pavement and the nearby shopfront windows, streaking the glass six feet up. No sirens – an attempt to avoid drawing too much attention? – but a patrol van was parked horizontal across the road, and through its back-window Louis thought he glimpsed a slumped and still shape, its muzzle no doubt slicked with red. He smelled metal in the air.

The lack of food in the market had gotten so bad that meat addicts had gone out for prey all the way up here. His father would never let him hear the end of this.

Louis walked away quickly, hand instinctively grasping at his right breast – the spot where he'd kept his pistol holstered, back when he'd led the Shishigumi. His father had confiscated the gun, but he'd gotten another one the next week. Never hurt to be prepared. Except he'd stupidly left it in his closet, tucked within an inconspicuous box of old schoolbooks.

A mere two blocks and once again animals were milling about like the predation had never happened. He ducked into a convenience store, empty save for the bison cashier and an elderly alpine goat perusing the canned drinks. As the doors hissed shut behind him, Louis went down the magazine racks by the front window, looking for the papers.

The headlines were carefully banal. Not much about growing civil unrest. The tabloids were typically lurid, but not about anything relevant. He picked up a copy of *The Stampede* and flipped through it, looking for something noteworthy amidst the celebrity gossip and hand-wringing about carnivore rights.

The doors hissed again. Out the corner of his eye, Louis saw another animal come in and browse the manga volumes. He went back to the headlines.

"You see what was going on outside?" the animal asked. A male voice, drawling and reedy.

Louis grunted. Paper rustled beside him.

"Must bring back memories. It's been a while since you've gotten your hands dirty."

Louis' brow wrinkled. Then his eyes went wide. The temperature inside the store seemed to plummet. He looked at the newcomer and his hands clutched the paper hard enough to tear it.

Kai was standing there. Or so his fevered brain thought, before it corrected itself – this mongoose was some ragged, wretched alternate Kai, his coat fraying at the hem, the fur atop his head in greasy spikes. He angled his head toward Louis and revealed the scar under his eye, a corkscrew of pink flesh deep enough to push the surrounding skin upward, locking him into a mad-eyed squint. His expression was faintly amused, but underneath it was a raw antipathy that made him flash back to the day he'd expelled Kai from the acting troupe, when the newly ex-actor had taken a swing at him. The day his and Legosi's lives had truly begun to intertwine.

The goat customer had paid for his drink. He ambled out the door, oblivious to them both. Louis watched him leave and saw three other animals standing still across the street, like jagged rocks in the pedestrians' flow. Watching them.

"You should see your face right now," the mongoose chuckled, and went back to his comic. "Priceless."

He carefully adjusted his look of shock into an imperious scowl. "I suppose you want me to tell you where Legosi is."

"It'd be appreciated. The bosses don't like to leave things half-done."

"I haven't the least idea. You and your bosses can go to hell."

The mongoose hummed. He seemed unbothered. Louis glanced at the cashier behind him; he was going through his phone, unaware of this drama. He pressed further.

"Don't waste your breath on threatening me, either. The police are at the end of their patience as it is. Try to harm someone of my status and you'll have tanks in your territory by nightfall." He shoved the newspaper back in the rack. "Frankly, you're taking a risk just getting close to me."

"No need for all the hostility. We're just here to do a job."

"Spare me. That's *your* handiwork out there. And what you did to the Inarigumi. I don't care how badly the law mistreated you. Nothing justifies this much brutality."

"Oh, the law never mistreated *me*." The mongoose closed the book. "We've got plenty of sob stories to go around, but you shouldn't paint us all with the same brush."

"Then why do this? Money? There's better ways to make a living."

"Money's decent. But that's not it either." The mongoose grinned at him then. His fangs were crooked, yellowed, splotching brown in places like bad fruit.

He said, "I joined up to see things *die*."

Louis had no response to that. The bluntness of it had stunned him.

"You've got no idea what it's like," the mongoose said. "Having to watch all these idiots forcing themselves to get along. It tastes like shit in your mouth. Makes you feel like you're

losing your mind. But then I found Pat. He put the truth into words. We're just empty stomachs that can't be filled. Open mouths waiting to bite down. We're holes. We're *nothing*." He grinned wider. "I've gotten to see so many animals realize the same. And then I carried what was left of them in my coat. I couldn't have hoped for a better way to live."

"You're insane," Louis breathed. "Every one of you."

"It's not just us. Melon had everyone in the market screaming his name, right before that dumbass lion put him down. He almost had them understanding the truth. That was a sad night." The mongoose sighed nostalgically. "But we made up for it. I'm the one who escorted that smug bitch Renne to the slaughterhouse, you know. Karlov showed me the picture of what she looked like right before we skinned her. When I saw that face, I knew I could die happy."

"If you're trying to make me understand your perspective, then you're failing," he said coldly. "I should have killed more of you when I had the chance."

"Ooh, tough guy. If I remember right, you just sent a whole bunch of pawns to take us out instead of lifting a finger yourself. Who were they, I wonder?" Louis said nothing, and the mongoose shrugged. "I shouldn't have expected any better from a silver-spoon asshole like you, no matter how long you moonlighted in the black market."

"I was born as livestock." He hissed it out without thinking, but it was worth the stab of satisfaction he felt when the mongoose's smile vanished. "Years spent in the dark. I couldn't even speak. All I could do was wait for the day I'd be dragged out of my cage and carved up. I know more about appetite and cruelty than you *ever* will."

The mongoose stared. Then he smirked again.

"Maybe you did once," he said. "But I think you've forgotten. Still, if you really can't tell us anything about that wolf..."

Louis barely saw his hand move. An instant later the mongoose had a tarry black revolver leveled at his chest. He looked at the bore of the barrel and then up to the mongoose's eyes and realized all at once what a terrible miscalculation he'd made. There was a glittering insanity in that beady gaze that mocked all law, all consequence. It didn't care who he was. It was the sort of hateful hunger that would leave nothing behind for anyone.

He looked at the cashier again, and this time the bison noticed him. Louis watched him bolt up. He'd seen the terror in his expression.

But then the mongoose stepped back, and pointed the gun at his own temple.

"Smile, prince," he said, and thumbed back the hammer. "Something beautiful is going to happen."

The gun fired and sent a candycolor spray of blood and brain across the newsstand. The mongoose lurched and fell, already dead, and his skull cracked wetly against the shelf. He hit the floor face-down, one leg still weakly kicking. The cashier stood frozen an aisle away.

Louis, too, was paralyzed, his coat speckled with red, his hands bunched uselessly at his sides. He forced his head to turn back to the window. The animals across the street had gone but now there were others, standing goggle-eyed in front of the glass, watching the droplets of blood fatten and run.

Everywhere I Go, It Rains On Me

The black market's cemetery was, like the Dokugumi's hideout, located on the border between the market district and polite society, a hardscrabble patch of land whose tombstones were laid in wandering, esoteric patterns. Despite the stratospheric crime rate in this part of the city, the cemetery itself was underpopulated; most animals around here were too familiar with death to make ceremony of it, and burying corpses was often considered a waste of good nutrition. The majority of stones were for felines, whose quasi-mystical view of life and death ironically made them engage with it in a far more typical fashion. The Shishigumi and Madaragumi both had plots devoted to noteworthy members of their gangs, with Buddhist inscriptions and the occasional offering (the latter of which was often stolen by the street kids). But even those graves were seldom visited. Until recently.

Free was here, kneeling before a smashed and vandalized grave. On the stone's lower half, the characters for "Lion's Glasses" could just barely be made out. The glasses themselves had also been smashed, ground to shards at the base of the stone, but no one had come to take them away, as if the vandal had lost their nerve midway through. The grave had been desecrated the week after Melon's death, two days after Free had succeeded him as the Shishigumi's leader. Dolph hadn't even gotten a place here. They'd been forced to bury him in the courtyard of their headquarters like a pauper.

The drizzle had started again, and condensation gathered and dripped off Free's mane. His left eye squinted as the water ran down into it while the right stared on, blind and insensate. He laid a pack of sodden cigarettes beside the shattered glasses. They were unsmokable, but would still be stolen later that afternoon.

"Hey, Ibuki. Looks like it's finally here," he said. "The collapse we've all been waiting for."

It was early in the morning, around ten a.m., and at least half the market's stalls and shops were abandoned. Just as the Families had predicted, the food supply had been choked off by the Butchers and the cackling raincoated lunatic who'd been pulling their strings. The lizards and the leopards had distributed all they had, but it wouldn't last long, and many of the vendors had refused to take the final shipment at all, instead closing up shop and barricading themselves in whatever hovels would still shelter them. They were scared. If you sold meat at a time like this, you ran the risk of being viewed as just another product. There had already been two deaths to that effect, and more were surely coming.

Free had mumbled something about personal business to Miguel and stalked out of the headquarters with cigarettes in pocket. The lions all knew what he meant by that.

He wasn't a skeptic like Agata. He believed in a feline's intuitive powers, and right now doom was hanging around him thick as the sulfur from a volcanic vent. Like he'd said to Louis, it could portend his own death, but death was hanging over the entire district now, maybe even the whole city, so that he could no longer tease the thread of his mortality from anyone else's. Everybody he passed seemed like the walking dead. At least in this place there wasn't any confusion about it.

He kept talking to the stone. Sometimes he could imagine that Ibuki was standing nearby, glasses shining and whole, looking at him without judgement. It was possible. A place like this would be mobbed with ghosts.

“I brought Dolph here right before it all went to hell. Do you remember that, Ibuki? I was bitching up a storm about how dull this place had gotten.” He chuckled bitterly. “Careful what you wish for, I guess. I think the last thing I said to him was...I can’t even remember. I was thanking him, I think. For bringing the blood for our torch. There was so much blood that day. Never seen an animal try to eat himself like that before.” Free flexed his hands, claws popping in and out. “Guess I wasn’t as worldly-wise as I thought.”

In his youth, he’d been one of the kids who would steal offerings from these stones, after days of watching the mourners come and go – he’d dash in and snatch liquor or treats or cigarettes while they were still fresh, eating what he could, selling the rest. He’d fight kids twice his size or wall-eyed junkies for the insides of trash cans, and if he couldn’t find scraps inside, he’d chew paper wrappers with their smears of blood residue to keep his meat-drunkenness at bay. A dead-ender among scores of the similarly damned. He’d kept living mainly out of spite.

He’d been fifteen years old when Dolph, then eighteen, had glimpsed him laying out a squad of three other urchins for a couple of slime-smeared sausage links. Dolph had been new to the gang then, eager to curry favor, and had recommended Free to the boss. The recruitment had been a smashing success; Free fought twice as well with some proper food in his stomach. Ibuki had kept his distance at first but warmed up to him after a year or so, the three of them forming their own little clique within the gang, and by the time Louis had come along they’d all been lieutenants, with Free leering from the other two’s shadows. He was eating better and fighting bigger, but his lifestyle hadn’t changed much from those early days. He’d never wanted anything else. Never wanted this.

“I know I can’t complain,” he told the stone. “Sometimes you just get dealt a shit hand, right? And the kid’s doing alright. We’re keeping it together. For as long as we can.”

The fur on the back of his neck stood up.

Though this little premonition wasn’t necessary – he could see the shadow fall over him, feel the sudden cessation of raindrops on his mane. He’d gotten so caught up in talking to the dead that he’d lost touch with the real world. Free sighed, but didn’t move.

“Just do what you came here to do,” he said.

“That would require you to stand up first,” said a papery voice high overhead.

Free turned and saw Agrippa standing there, looking down at him bemusedly. He was unarmed, assuming one didn’t count the massive black umbrella he clutched in one claw. It was like a mourning circus tent.

Free waited a second longer, and then stood and faced him. Behind Agrippa, Zeke and two other lizards loitered by the cemetery’s entrance.

“Had a feeling I’d find you here,” said Agrippa. “But all alone? I know your numbers have been depleted lately, but that’s awfully foolhardy. These are dangerous times.”

Free snorted. “Aren’t they always.”

“Have you been keeping well?”

“Ain’t dead yet. Despite these Butcher assholes’ best efforts.” His upper lip twitched, revealing one long canine tooth. “You know, I heard their boss uses Komodo venom?”

The scaly jigsaw of Agrippa’s features did not so much as flicker. “Do you believe I’m a threat to you, Free?”

“I dunno, do I?”

“What do your instincts say?”

“They say I can’t trust your two-ton ass as far as I can throw it,” Free said. “But my brain says that you’re too uptight to ever join up with nutcases like these.”

Agrippa’s jaw made a complicated movement. It was like he was chewing on Free’s response and trying to decide whether he liked the flavor.

“Walk with me?” he asked.

Free shrugged and gestured for him to lead the way.

Agrippa’s subordinates fell in line behind them as they returned to the back alleys. Free felt eyes on him again, and this probably wasn’t just paranoia – even if the Butchers weren’t keeping tabs on them, so many animals were shut up in their homes that anyone streetside was practically free theater. Agrippa was undaunted. He walked with his head held high. His tail dragged a long clean streak on the filthy cobbles underfoot.

They arrived at a cluster of stalls, all deserted. Any vendors still active now kept to the main thoroughfare, where the streets were wider and there were more escape routes just in case their customers became aggressive. Agrippa furled his umbrella, and then took a seat under the canvas overhang of one stall and motioned for Free to do the same. He sat down gingerly, careful not to get splinters in his tail. The smell of meat still hung thick around the gnarled wood. There was a black X gouged into the whorls on the countertop like treasure marked on some inscrutable map.

“Zeke, go and play with the others for a bit, would you?” Agrippa said. “The bosses need to speak.”

Free didn’t even hear them leave. He just glanced over and there was a Zeke-shaped patch of empty space where he and the other lizards had been.

“Hell of a lackey you’ve got there,” he said, without much rancor.

“More than you know,” said Agrippa. He looked around this cramped little street, and for a moment his face creased in pain. “What a dismal scene.”

“You ever seen it this bad before? How long have you been here, anyway?”

“Why spoil that mystery now? But no, I haven’t. Never like this.”

“Place feels like a damn carcass of what it used to be,” Free said.

“And all the outsiders are readying knife and fork.” Agrippa removed his lighter and jumbo-sized cigarettes from his coat. He struck the lighter, then again, and yet again, with mounting frustration, and Free rolled his eye and produced a matchbook. Agrippa paused, then leaned in as Free struck, ignited, lit the cigarette’s end. He puffed contemplatively before he spoke again.

“Have the police contacted you as well, Free?”

“Yeah. Plainclothes. They talked to Jimma when he was on patrol.” Free put the matches away. “I know the guy stands out in a crowd, but the way they tracked him down like that was damned spooky.”

“Civic Harmony is apparently involved in this now. It’s to be expected.”

“We told ‘em to pound sand. Ain’t like they can salvage this mess, anyhow.”

“We’re in agreement there. Unless they’re able to understand their enemy, they’re bound to lose. And the Butchers defy understanding for so many, not in the least because they’ve concealed their true selves all this time.” The rain picked up, drumming the canvas over their heads. “Still. I have some theories about what drives the one behind them all. Pat, I mean.”

“Yeah? I’m listening.”

Smoke emerged in thin wisps from Agrippa’s nostrils, like those of a far more antiquated breed of dragon. “Do you know why my subordinates dress the way they do?”

“That discount-commando getup, you mean.” Free didn’t try to hide his contempt. “I figured it’s got something to do with venomous animals being used as shock troopers.”

“Just so. One more charming aspect of this society’s prejudice towards my kind. We carry death in our mouths, so we’re encouraged to head into battlefields, where we’ll be surrounded by death as well. They view it as a badge of their heritage, I suppose.”

“But not you. Unless you’re packing Kevlar under that coat.”

“No,” said Agrippa. “I’m not a warrior.”

“But you were.” It wasn’t a question.

“In ages long past,” he said dryly. “There’s always some picayune territory dispute or insurgency that needs dealing with. I had my fill of it and came back here. Thought I’d put

everything I learned on the battlefield to use, building up the Dokugumi instead. The other Families trade out leaders like pairs of shoes, no offense meant...”

“Some taken.”

“...but there was no Dokugumi before myself. We reptiles aren’t a cooperative sort. I had to do a lot of work to get them all together.” He leaned forward on the counter, the smoldering cigarette pinched between crooked fingers. “Don’t recall when that ridiculous fashion choice of theirs caught on, but I let it be. None of these young ones have ever seen real conflict. I was fine letting them play war if it kept them in the group.”

Free stayed put in his seat, but his tail twitched and lashed. He doubted that Agrippa had ever opened up like this to someone outside of his own kind, and nothing about his posture suggested it was a lie – his gaze had gone faraway, the cigarette forgotten between his fingertips. More than anything else, the old reptile’s sudden candor enhanced this apocalyptic vibe in the black market’s atmosphere. As he trembled, so did the earth beneath their feet.

“That why you’re such a pompous dick to us all the time?” he asked, trying to keep his voice light. “All this gangster stuff is just small potatoes compared to the shit you’ve been through?”

“Vulgar, but not inaccurate. For a long time, that’s what I believed.” He took another drag, blew more smoke. “I was the worldly general, striding tall amongst witless children. But I was wrong. This market wasn’t my battlefield. It was my escape from them. If you want to see what real war looks like...”

“...then look at Pat. That what you’re getting at?”

“Karlov was just his puppet,” Agrippa said. “That dog led me to think that the Butchers were nothing but upstart businessmen. But ever since they let that mask fall off, this chaos they’re sowing...it reminds me of times I’d rather forget. Pat is apparently quite old, himself. I wonder what he thinks about the war – the great one, the first schism between carnivores and herbivores. Maybe he regrets not being born into that time. So he’s bringing it with him instead. Seeding it wherever he goes.” His shoulders hunched within his coat. “Someone who truly hungers for war will always beat those who merely play at it. And that’s what I was doing. Playing games. I was too arrogant.”

Free glanced around the street as if a convenient exit from this conversation would present itself. He saw nothing and no one. He’d faced some challenges this year, but attempting to comfort Agrippa dwarfed all of them. There were other members of the Families who’d give up their limbs to see a moment of weakness this profound.

He gave it a try anyway. “For what it’s worth, everyone’s pretty much rallied around you during this shitshow. Ain’t like there’s any other options. Cruce is burnt out and our group, well, you’re right that it’s seen better days.”

“I want to apologize for how I acted during that meeting,” Agrippa said. “The one after Renne’s death. I misjudged the Shishigumi, too. You’ve done well.”

“That’s mostly ‘cause we’ve got friends in weird places. You never put much stock on building alliances outside your own members, Agrippa. Isn’t that why you were always bitching about Renne?”

The cigarette’s remnant bent between Agrippa’s teeth. “Since we’re being so candid with each other. Do you know what Renne’s endgame was, cozying up to the Madaragumi?”

Free shook his head wordlessly. Agrippa’s slit gaze had become very penetrating all of a sudden.

“She was doing it to outflank *you*. She’d been laying the groundwork for years to monopolize the black market, but my Family’s strength was too much for her. She needed to eliminate all other opposition first. Cruce was always weak-minded, so she seduced him into sharing resources with her. A formal union between their two groups was imminent. Those bombings were a blessing for the Shishigumi. If not for them, she would have stamped you all out within weeks of Melon’s death.”

Free shrugged. “You knew what you were getting into when you were dealing with Renne. Maybe she would’ve beaten us, maybe not. But that’s the way this game is played. You never got your head around that, old-timer.”

Agrippa stayed quiet for a long time before he answered.

“Maybe not,” he said. “I always despised Renne, but I never contemplated something even worse taking her place. She deserved better than what happened to her.” He ground out the stub of his cigarette on the countertop. “And so did you.”

Raindrops pattered on the overhang like a message in code. Agrippa would no longer meet Free’s eye. The lion’s brow crinkled, and he looked from Agrippa’s bowed and solemn face to the stall’s countertop, that black X gouged deep into its surface. Realization dawned.

Free slammed his hands on the counter and tried to leap off the stool but Zeke came at him from behind and clamped an arm around his neck and jammed a syringe into the soft meat below his chin. Free planted an elbow in Zeke’s gut and sent him reeling but not before he pressed the plunger, and Free’s vision at once doubled, then trebled, then started to go dark. He staggered drunkenly to Agrippa with claws out, gripped his coat like someone hanging off a mountainside, and brought his other hand up to Agrippa’s face. Agrippa’s glasses fell away; he didn’t move or react as Free’s claws scored him deep. Four bloody canyons opened up amidst his scales, and then with one final wheeze Free released him and hit the ground and did not move again.

Zeke’s companions were helping him up. Agrippa picked up his glasses, shook them clean again, and tucked them into his coat pocket. His wounds were already bleeding freely, the red a sharp contrast to his mottled green.

“Get him behind the stall so we can leave,” he said. “They should pick him up momentarily.”

Zeke pulled down his mask. The mouth underneath was a thin line, one overlong fang jutting slightly from his upper lip. He looked to Free’s unconscious body, and then back to Agrippa.

“Are you really okay with this, sir?” he asked. His voice was soft, surprisingly rich.

Agrippa’s hand shot out and grabbed Zeke by the throat, and the young lizard made a shocked gagging sound as he was pulled in close. Blood pooled in the gaps between Agrippa’s scales, dripped between his bared teeth. His slit eyes blazed like fireflies caught mid-flash.

“Of course I’m okay with it. Is that not clear from my tranquil countenance?” he hissed. “Fall in line and *do as you’re fucking told!*”

Zeke had gone stiff, his scales waxy with fear, and all at once Agrippa’s own face sagged and he let him go. Zeke backed off, massaging his neck, the other lizards watching meekly on. Agrippa gathered his coat around him. In that moment, he seemed much smaller.

“There’s no way out of this now. Our only choice is to fall, until we hit the bottom.” He spared one last look at Free. “The damn fool should have listened to his instincts.”

* * *

Louis was under quarantine again. It wasn’t any more fun than the first time.

The police had shown up at the convenience store fresh after packing up the victims of that predation incident down the street; their nerves had been frazzled and they hadn’t recognized Louis, which had been the only bright spot in that terrible afternoon. The cops had been prepared to bring him down to the police station for questioning, and what a thrill it would have been to sit under those interrogation-room lights with the knowledge that he’d been one of the Four Families’ leaders, but Louis had thought ahead. He’d dialed home as soon as he could get his hands to stop shaking, and the squad cars had been cut off by a limousine glossy and sleek as a streak of jet. Oguma had emerged from it like a magician’s trick, and a few quiet words later the disgusted officers had been forced to leave Louis to his father’s mercy.

They’d rode home in crushing silence. Oguma hadn’t spoken to him once that day, leaving his servants to command Louis to go back to his room; he’d either thought a lecture would be a waste of energy, or needed time to think up a really good one. His displeasure instead manifested in the tourniquet-tight schedule of daily tasks that Yuta had presented to Louis, and the plank-faced bodyguards now roaming the manor’s halls. Louis knew that he’d been gambling with his father’s goodwill by acting so carelessly in the midst of all this social unrest, and on that day, he’d gone bust all at once.

He still had his phone. He still had to call Legosi. And he fully intended to do so, after he cleared his head enough to write a single paragraph of this infernal school report. He’d been erasing and rephrasing the same sentence for the last twenty-five minutes, and it wasn’t even a particularly complex sentence.

His phone went off. Louis rolled his eyes heavenward and made a wish for it not to be Haru, then got it out of his pocket and blinked at the number. He answered the call.

“Agata?” he said.

“Hey, Louis. You hanging in there okay?”

“About as well as can be expected.” This wasn’t technically a lie. “What do you need? I imagine things in the black market are getting difficult.”

“That’s one way to put it. Meat’s all gone. Definitely feels like endgame.”

“Do you need to evacuate? I know Free’s against it, but I can talk him around.”

“Thanks for the offer, but that’s not why I called,” said Agata. “Well, um, maybe it is. Sort of. It’s a weird question, but have you heard from Free lately? He went out this morning and hasn’t come back.”

Long silence. On Louis’ computer screen the cursor blinked and blinked, tallying off the seconds.

“Louis? You there?”

“I’m here,” he said briskly. “Got lost in thought for a moment. I’m sorry, but we haven’t spoken since the restaurant.”

“It’s fine. He likes his quiet time anyway. And it’s not like he can’t protect himself. You’ve seen him fight.” Agata laughed. *“At least he’s not tearing his shirt off anymore.”*

“Yes, small mercies. Is there anything else?”

“Nah, I just wanted to reach out. We’ll wait for him to come back. Take care, alright?”

“Same to you, Agata.”

He hung up and sat there a while, hands on his knees, face carefully blank. He watched the white light of his computer until the screensaver kicked in and it went dark.

His antlers itched.

Louis’ leg now produced the majority of irritating aches and pains in his infuriatingly frail body, but before Legosi had chewed it off, his antlers had given him the most trouble. The skin at their roots itched when they were about to shed, which happened once a year or so, and when he was under stress, which was always. He’d last dropped them in the late spring and was well behind schedule for another shedding, but they still got surprised him sometimes, as they’d done when Free had almost killed him last year. Some wealthy deer, his father among them, chose to do away with the randomness of it, having their antlers sheared off by laser cutters and then replaced with prosthetics at regular periods. The Horns Conglomerate had a clinic for such a thing on speed-dial, and Louis had tried it once before, but the clip-ons had bothered him even worse until his original antlers started growing back in. Life was a succession of minor miseries.

Louis rose and went to his closet. In the back corner, in a cardboard box behind a cluster of pressed undershirts and the remnants of his Cherryton schoolbooks, he found what he was looking for. The pistol snug in its holster. He confirmed that it was loaded and strapped it on.

Underneath the pistol was a switchblade, which he tucked into his coat pocket. He put on his shoes. He zipped up his coat.

Throughout this ritual Louis thought of very little. In the instants where his mind faltered, it summoned up that scarfaced mongoose, watching him like someone with a secret. *You just sent a whole bunch of pawns to take us out that night. Who were they, I wonder?*

He pushed the image away. It was a needless distraction. He went to his door and knocked, one hand on the butt of his gun.

“Hello?” he called. “Could you come in here a moment, please? I need to request something.”

No response. Louis gently turned the handle and peered out the doorway into the halls beyond. He had expected Oguma to post sentries outside his room, but none were present. His father still underestimated him. Or overestimated, maybe. His calculations were still hard to discern.

He stepped into the manor’s hall, with its fifteen-foot high windows, funereal processions of tasteful artwork, and carpet deep enough to swim in. The latter muffled his footsteps nicely as he made his way to the foyer. His step was steady and measured, back straight. He was an actor, after all, and right now every inch of his body radiated innocuousness. *Nothing wrong here, it said. I’m just taking a stroll through my home.*

When a voice called out for him, he walked faster. And when that same voice shouted it, he started to run.

It wasn’t a graceful run – his fake leg forced him into a shambolic jog that sent a jolt of pain up to his hip bone with every other step – but it was enough to get him to the foyer stairs, a pair of sweeping flights that embraced the marble floor beyond. He got halfway down when he saw Yuta there dusting the family portrait, and silently cursed to himself as the butler noticed him.

“Master Louis!”

Louis breezed past him. The door was almost in reach but there was a clamor behind him now, numerous footfalls approaching the steps. All of them could move faster than him. Yuta’s trotting footsteps were also getting closer.

“Master Louis, *please!*” he cried. This disobedience is completely unacceptable!”

Louis whirled in place and leveled his gun at the butler. Yuta squeaked and stepped back with hands raised, and the look of shocked hurt on the sheep’s face twisted in Louis’ heart. But he kept his own expression solemn. At the top of the stairs, several bodyguards, all large-scale herbivores, had clustered, two of them holding tasers; they’d started down the steps but all froze when the gun had come out.

“Yuta, please listen,” Louis said calmly. “You are a valued member of this household, and you’ve frankly been far more patient with me than I deserve. If I shot you, I would never be

free of the guilt. *But that won't stop me.*" He looked up to the bodyguards. "You're all going to let me walk out of here unhindered, do you understand? My father will—"

His voice stopped dead. Because the guards had parted ranks, and in through the middle of them strode Oguma in all his six-foot-three glory, the twisted forest of his antlers like a diadem suspended over his head. Louis couldn't make out his face from here, but his bespectacled stare nailed him to the spot. After an endless, agonizing pause, he finally spoke.

"What use is there in threatening a servant?" he said. "I thought you had better judgement."

Louis didn't take the hint until Oguma began to descend the stairs. He swung the pistol from Yuta to Oguma, barely hearing the butler's protests. His father continued to advance until he was maybe a half-dozen paces away. Now his face was clear. It was the same inscrutably stern mask as ever.

"Where do you intend to go?" he asked.

Louis said nothing. But his father nodded as if he'd spoken anyway.

"Last year, you told me that this nonsense was over with," he said. "You gave your word."

"Let me out," he said through grit teeth. All his eloquence had left him. It was like he was reverting to the trembling mute that had first been dragged out of that cell.

"Here we are again," said Oguma. "What do you find so objectionable about this life I've provided for you? It must be quite dire, given how eager you are to flee from it."

"I have business to take care of." He forced the words out. "Obligations. You won't stop me."

"Obligations," his father repeated, like it was the title of a distasteful film. "Do these obligations have anything to do with your little encounter yesterday? Or your repeated absences from my estate? Is that why you keep placing yourself at risk?"

He took a step forward, and then another, and then reached out for the gun. This was the same way it had gone the last time Louis had tried to hold him up, in a desperate bid to release himself from this life once and for all. Back then, Oguma had just clasped his palm around the barrel and smirked at his son's impetuosity. Louis' teeth clenched until he thought they might crack. There was a tensed string somewhere in his mind, a wire under impossible strain, and he felt it was going to snap any moment.

Then, Oguma's hand stopped. His mouth opened a fraction, and then closed. Louis didn't know what he saw, or why it made him step away and clasp both hands behind his back.

"Whatever they are," he said, "they appear to be terribly urgent."

He didn't speak again, didn't move. Now it was Louis' turn to gape as the words sank in. Keeping his eyes on Oguma, he reached behind him and touched the doorhandle. When Oguma still didn't react, Louis turned fully, pulled the door open, and half-walked, half-ran into the gray light beyond.

The door clicked shut. The foyer was silent as a temple. Yuta and the bodyguards all looked at Oguma in disbelief. Yuta, to his credit, found his voice first.

“Master Oguma, why?! How you just let him-”

“It wasn’t like last time,” Oguma said. “He would have shot me if I’d gotten any closer. Non-fatally, if possible, but at my age it’s best not to take chances.”

“Should we send the guards after him? Or no, the police!” He started off. “I’ll call them at once.”

“You will not,” he said. Yuta stopped and turned; the poor sheep’s wool seemed to be getting grayer by the minute.

“Master, I know it’s not my place, but Louis is the Horns Conglomerate’s heir. We can’t let him throw his life away!”

“I am quite aware of who Louis is and what he represents. If he does not return by dark, then we call the authorities. Until then...” He turned back to the stairs. “I’m cancelling all my appointments. Please bring some tea to my study when convenient, Yuta. The guards will be paid in full for today.”

Despite his perpetually frayed nerves, Yuta was very good at his job. No one could steward a house this large without a keen eye for detail, and that was why, when Oguma showed his back to Yuta, he saw how the stag’s clasped hands shook. Just the slightest amount, but it was enough.

“As you wish, Master Oguma,” he said.

Beyond the estate’s borders, Louis headed for the train station. The maw of the black market awaited him.

* * *

The world dwelled in a black fog. His body was not his own, bones burning, muscles jellied, all of it borne up by a clutch of unkind hands. The ones carrying him didn’t notice his eyes flutter, or the hitching interruption in his breath. It didn’t matter. This moment of consciousness was just him breaking the surface of the water before it dragged him back down again.

He cursed the reptiles, the Butchers, himself for being so blind. The fatalism he’d carried had become habitual and now it would be his undoing. But then his nostrils flared, instinctively, and he breathed in the scents of the city. He was cocooned in an ashen bouquet of mixed meat, the smell that marked the ones carrying him, but outside of that? Gravel dust, car exhaust, the distant but hearty whiff of buffalo meat from some abandoned or soon-to-be abandoned stall. From a nearby vent leading into unknowable depths came a sulfurous reek that made his snout crinkle even in this half-awareness.

His eye rolled, taking in the shadowed geometry of the surrounding buildings. And his last thought, as he heard a door open and the hands bore him into a deeper darkness, was: *I've been here before.*

* * *

He awoke again. This wasn't any more pleasant than the last time, and even worse, he felt himself shaking off the injection. He was here to stay.

He was in a chair, all harsh steel angles, its arms and legs bearing clamps that shackled him in place. A final, much larger clamp was fastened around his chest, so tight that he couldn't breathe deeply without pain. His shirt and jacket had been taken away and the fur beneath wasn't enough to insulate him from the room's wet chill. It all smelled like old blood. Somewhere beneath him was a sound. An endless, rushing pulse.

His sight was still clouded but shapes presented themselves, little by little. To his left and right were an array of other chairs in varying sizes, dollhouse-small to larger than his own. The floor was steel grate and the ceiling was an abstract craze of dripping pipes that had no clear purpose or terminus. He could barely make out the dim square of a door on the other side of the room, but far more concerning was what stood in its way. A sharp-eared animal was fussing over a small cart, picking bits of metal off its surface, putting them down again. And the animal was singing, a tuneless, toneless dirge that sounded like a coffin being dragged across dry earth:

"Isn't it wonderful, my life? Please, could you kiss my name when the music's over? Turn off the lights, it's been such a sweet time...say, could you pray for me, my friend? We're starting *o-ver-time*..."

The animal glanced in his direction and went stiff, a hair-thin stiletto blade clutched in one hand.

"Awake already?" he said. "That was commendably fast."

"You're the shittiest singer I've ever heard." Free's voice was still slurry, his jaw uncooperative.

"Haha. I don't doubt it. Luckily, no one's ever had to endure a repeat performance."

The animal's blandly polite voice somehow made this even more ominous. He approached Free and the shadows fell away from him to reveal a Doberman pinscher in a high-necked sweater. His smile was bright but his muzzle was nauseatingly plasticine, so that it looked like he'd stolen the expression from someone else's face. There was some rectangular contrivance dangling from his collar, and he raised it up with his free hand.

"Karlov the Doberman," he said. "In case it wasn't already clear. Look up a moment, please?"

Free didn't comply but the camera flash went off anyway, hitting him like a bucketful of cold water. His whole body jerked with the shock; something hot popped inside his vertebrae as

his head flinched away. Karlov snapped two more shots in quick succession, then nodded and let the camera down.

“That’ll do for a start,” he said. “Thank you.”

“I guess you do this often,” Free growled.

“Not as much as you’d think. Live animals do come down here occasionally, but their time with us isn’t as...*protracted* as yours is going to be.”

“I’m not telling you shit.”

“You don’t have to. This is an exhibition, not an interrogation. That was your ‘before’ shot, so to speak.” He stepped up to Free and began gently pinching his bound forearm. Free snapped his jaws inches from Karlov’s face and Karlov casually backhanded him hard enough to set his head spinning, and then returned to feeling him up.

“I don’t like taking pictures of animals this way,” he continued. “In my experience, the best shots are often spontaneous. Unexpected. They require some setup, sure, getting *this* subject in *that* spot and so on and so forth, but tying them down like this...anyway, we’re all just working with what we have. Try to relax a moment, if you can.”

Karlov took the stiletto and inserted it into the meat of Free’s arm just below the elbow. There was a bright twinge of pain, nothing he couldn’t endure, but then Free’s claws popped out, involuntarily, and wouldn’t go back in no matter how hard he tried. He struggled to do so in mute shock as Karlov returned to the cart and came back with a small pair of pliers, and Karlov clicked them together twice and clamped them around the claw of his middle finger and twisted and pulled. Free cried out, his hand spasmed, and then Karlov held up the pliers with the blood-darkened claw in their grip. He plucked it out and flicked it away, where it rolled between the grates and into the rushing depths.

He pulled out the stiletto. “Most felines have these pressure points. One other thing Pat taught me.”

“Go to hell!” Free shouted. “Both of you! *All* of you!”

“Does this hurt?” Karlov asked, as if he hadn’t even heard him. He prodded the hole in Free’s fingertip and there was pain, but Free was too busy vainly trying to tear out Karlov’s throat to bother with it. The dog tutted and went back to his cart, replaced his tools.

“The weakness in your muscles should last for some time, but it looks like the tranquilizer’s still numbing you as well. We can wait a little longer.” He turned back to Free. “Did you have any questions?”

He wanted to spit more invective at this insufferably prim canine, but then another image rose up in his head. Its appearance compelled him to snarl something else, made almost unintelligible by his clotted rage:

“Agrippa.”

“Yes,” said Karlov.

“Fucking *traitor*...”

“It started shortly after the second bombing,” Karlov said. “Someone in the Damned 44th leaked our plans to the Dokugumi. They’re usually known for their discretion, but Agrippa also had a long-standing relationship with them. And I suppose they were getting uncomfortable with the quantity of Pat’s orders. What it entailed for this city.” He gazed up at the pipes as though reading his next words in their design. “Instead of blowing the whistle on us, Agrippa sought us out. Said that he’d let us be in exchange for a favor.”

“So that was it,” Free said. “That’s why you bastards killed Renne.”

Karlov nodded. “Pat believed his terms were agreeable enough.”

“Then why this?” He flexed against his bonds. “Why’s he still doing your goddamn dirty work?”

Karlov beamed, wide enough to crease his muzzle clip. “The Damned 44th underestimated Agrippa’s ambition. He, in turn, underestimated ours. He apparently expected a simple assassination or something similar, but Pat is...artistic, in his way. Violence is his medium. He likes to make statements. What was done to the Inarigumi surprised Agrippa. Both in its scope and presentation.”

Free thought back, to the meeting between the Family heads. Agrippa’s unease back then had seemed genuine; the old lizard had been on edge, covering it up with his condescension, letting it slip out when Free had dropped the line about Legosi donating to the black market. And he’d been the one who’d mentioned that the explosives were military-grade. Well, of course he’d know. He’d been talking around the edges of things, playing both sides.

“He’s survived here for a long time, hasn’t he?” Karlov said. “He must have thought he could survive anything. But even he has limits. Pat said that if he didn’t bring you to us, he’d send one of our number to inform the police about his complicity with our plans. He wouldn’t be shown any mercy. Not with Civic Harmony on the case.”

So Agrippa’s grief earlier that day had also been real. It didn’t make Free feel any better about this predicament.

“And why me?” he said. “You pissy about how we fucked up your boys earlier? If your freakshow boss hadn’t had such a hardon over Legosi then this never would’ve happened. You’ve got no one to blame but yourselves.”

“Pat’s interests are his own,” said Karlov. “I’m not able to override him on these matters. However.”

He unslung the camera and set it on the cart, and then clasped his hands together, gone still as a carved monument. The look on his face down made Free’s guts twist with dread. He’d only seen eyes like that on hardcore meat junkies coming at him for their next meal, a black blankness that didn’t belong on anything living.

He said, “We targeted all of Legosi’s associates but one. We believed that he was too high-profile to be dealt with. But your involvement makes things far simpler. It’s clear Louis still cares for you, hm? This should cause him quite a bit of grief. And that, Pat reasons, will harm Legosi in turn. Connections are the underbelly of the soul, you know. The more you have, the more easily you can be gutted.”

“But this isn’t about Legosi for you,” Free said. “Is it.”

“I hate that deer,” Karlov said, almost dreamily. “What a repulsive little specimen.”

“Louis is ten times the animal you’ll ever be,” Free spat.

“He came so close to ruining everything. Pat wanted disorder in the market before he could set his plans in motion. Chaos is fertile soil. He knew that the Four Families would eventually degenerate enough to make that possible. But then the deer came along and everything became so *peaceful*. Had he remained as your leader, we could have been set back years. Luckily the Shishigumi dismissed him and brought on the mutant instead. Melon was everything we could have hoped for. And after *you* killed him, we finally had our opportunity. Thank you for that.”

Karlov was just doing it to goad him, Free knew, but he still felt a stab of guilt at his words of gratitude. It confirmed everything he’d suspected over the last two months – that his gunshot had somehow diverted things, set the Shishigumi and the black market on a far more catastrophic course than even Melon would have done. He choked back the feeling, smothered it with his rage.

“We didn’t *dismiss* Louis,” he said. “He left on his own and we accommodated him the best we could. And he still stuck by us, no matter how hard we tried to push him away. That’s called loyalty, you piece of shit. I thought dogs understood that much, but after what you did to Renne it’s clear that your brain’s as fucked up as your face.”

“I am loyal,” Karlov said quietly. “But my loyalty was pre-owed.”

He reached up and pulled away the muzzle clip. The snout underneath was a slick protuberance of furless meat, so chewed and mangled that it resembled the surface of fresh-churned mud. He set it down and pulled off his gloves, revealing hands with the same deformity. Free’s stomach was already starting to lurch, and then Karlov gripped his sweater and Free almost told him to stop, that was enough, but it was too late; he pulled it away and Free’s gorge rose up at the body that it covered. Everything about him up to the nape was that same grotesque texture, scarred meat raddled with holes as though the flesh had bubbled and burst like a pot of soup on boil, and it caught the dim light in this room like the slime slicking the pipes overhead.

Karlov folded his sweater up and placed it on the cart’s lower tier. “The rest of me is the same way, in case you’re wondering. Particularly my feet. Most of the sensation from the afflicted tissue is gone now, but it still flares up. Every so often.”

Free said nothing. The way that mangled meat rippled with Karlov’s movements had him ready to vomit. Karlov went back to examining his implements of torture, testing their edges

and hinges as he spoke.

“I was in a war, years ago. Not as a soldier. I’ve been a photographer all my life, and I wanted to capture something more...visceral, I suppose. More immediate. I went south, to the jungles, where there was a resource dispute. Coffee beans or something, I don’t remember. There I was stationed with a unit of a half-dozen other soldiers, all canines like myself. I stayed out of their way. We got along reasonably well. That’s natural for canines. There’s seldom any discord between our own kind.

“One day we were ambushed. The attack drove us off our assigned course, deep into the jungle. By the time we reached safety, half our number were dead. The rest of us had no way of contacting our allies. I remember the wetness of that place. Air so thick you could carve it, every scent magnified by the damp. You had to struggle just to breathe it. Everything alive in such a way I had never known.”

He shut his eyes and held out a hand as if waiting for rain. The pipes indulged him, a drop of condensate falling into his palm. Apparently satisfied, he continued.

“There was something in the soil,” he said. “Eggs of some sort. They embedded themselves in our flesh as we walked and slept. The insects there got beneath our clothes and laid more. Their young ate us in order to grow. Over the course of a day or two they would hatch, and chew, and wriggle out. Little plump grubs, white as bone. You can’t imagine the sensation. The rind of yourself being slowly devoured. We tore off our clothes to rid ourselves of the itching and that just exposed us to more of the eggs in the dirt. For days we moved on, dropping fattened larvae in our wake. We began to starve. So we turned to the worms.”

Karlov licked his lips.

“The taste was decent enough. Mostly I recall the feel of them. How they lingered on my tongue, fought not to slide down my throat. You could tell they still wanted to live. We ate them by the handful, and when my comrades slept that night, I reasoned: these worms had partaken of our own flesh. So by eating them, we’ve eaten a part of each other. And I stood over their sleeping bodies, and...well, I did what came naturally. They didn’t struggle much. Unlike the worms, I don’t think they wanted to live. Maybe none of us do. Beyond our appetites, these lives are such a tiresome burden.”

That unceasing sound beneath Free’s feet. He was certain that they were underground, unfathomably far. He thought of the constant rain overhead, scraping away the city’s filth down all its byways and drains, all of it accumulating here like plaque inside an artery.

“I’d been prepared to die as well,” Karlov said. “Walk until I fell and let the worms take me fully. Instead I encountered Pat. He’d been supplying weapons to the conflict. Both sides. He never discriminates. He recognizes the commonality in us all. And he recognized it in me.” Karlov picked up a far larger pair of pliers, their handle mottled with rust. “He taught me so much. Today, I’ll impart some of it to you. And when we’re done, the collage I’ll send to your own comrades will hopefully grant them some of that knowledge as well.”

Free summoned up the last of his bravado. “You’re not getting away with this. We’ll find you. The Shishigumi are going to tear right through you all.”

“They won’t have time. No one will find either of us.” He advanced on Free. “My comrades never left me, you see. They’ll be with me forever. And so will you.”

As Karlov’s hand drew closer, Free lunged forward, jaws open, meaning to tear his arm from the socket like a doll’s. But Karlov’s other hand grabbed him by the mane and forced his head back and the pliers snapped shut over his canine and started to twist.

The pain was bad but the sound was worse. Karlov took his time, and Free could hear the cellophane crackle of cartilage echoing in his skull, the rocking-chair creak of bone straining in the pliers’ grip. Blood spurted and flooded his mouth with its coppery taste but he didn’t scream, wouldn’t scream, even as Karlov began to sing again, his voice underscoring the sound of Free’s mutilation:

“Taking over the night, taking over blue times...can you hear that screaming *shout* inside your mind?” Free whimpered as the pliers jerked again. “Taking over the shine, taking over shooting stars...all I was talking about was mu-siiiic...”

The crackling turned to ripping and now Free did scream, the agony a swarm of insects rushing up through the roof of his mouth and behind his eyes; his shriek laid on top of Karlov’s lifeless last note for what felt like an eternity and then the tooth came free with a final wet sound, disgorging another freshet of blood that dripped down Free’s chin, marring his tattoo. He twitched and gasped as Karlov raised up the tooth, its root clotted with gum tissue. The dog licked away that gore like it was a lollipop.

Karlov said, “And that’s called *jazz*. ”

Sayonara, Wild Heart

Everyone in the black market knew to hide when the Shishigumi came back from a fight.

The Four Families were a necessary evil, they knew, forming a bulwark that protected the meat trade from the government or the police, but they still gave vendors and customers alike plenty of headaches with their little games, and the lions were by far the worst. Despite their snappy dress, they behaved like a mob of demented frat boys, demanding protection fees that even the other Families found outrageous and often smashing up stalls anyway just for the hell of it. Whenever they came back from a turf war or scuffle with some gang outside the city, they treated the whole market like their personal buffet, snatching steaks or bottles right out of the shopfronts and giddily consuming them on the way back to their corpse-studded headquarters. And all that didn't even touch the sick business that boss of theirs was allegedly into.

So the streets were empty as they walked through them now, a pack of Shishigumi soldiers fifteen strong that moved through the abandoned stalls like a hurricane. They whooped, cursed, gobbled down whatever scraps they found. A ragtag gang of wolverines from the south had come sniffing around for business opportunities, and what remained of them was now somewhere under the sea. The M.V.P. of this little scuffle was at the front of the lions' group, borne up on his comrades' shoulders. He wore an ear-to-ear grin, though the right side of his face was a mask of dripping blood.

"Way to go, Free!" one of the lions behind him shouted.

"Let's hear it for the new kid!"

"When you decked that bastard, I swear I could hear his jaw shatter. You've got one hell of a right hook on you, newbie!"

The lion holding up Free's left arm was young, practically a cub himself, but with the stern mien of someone twice his age. The one on his right was older and had a hint of serious muscle underneath his suit, his mane done up in tight ringlets. The Shishigumi's pagoda loomed in the distance.

"They got him good," Miguel grunted. "Kid, can you see out of that eye?"

"Nah. S'all dark," said Free. He was still smiling.

"Thought as much. It's probably going to stay that way."

"It's cool. I've got another."

Dolph looked over at Miguel. "Will the boss be happy?"

"One of the boys already called it in. He's thrilled. Just don't let your guard down around him."

They paraded Free through the courtyard and into the tower's foyer, and there amidst a cluster of other lions stood the boss, his cane clenched in both fists. Everyone knew that he didn't actually need it to walk; that cane was just another affectation of his, a regal touch for the "King of Beasts." More than once he'd beaten some other animal with it until their brains had painted the floor.

Dolph and Miguel released Free and he lurched forward, licking blood off his cheek. His new suit was in shreds and the hide beneath was scored with claw-marks, but the deepest wounds by far went over his eye. The boss leaned down and peered at the wound, then produced a handkerchief and wiped away the blood. Free didn't flinch as the cloth passed over the runnels in his flesh.

"I'm told you were quite the powerhouse in our dispute with those outsiders," he said. "But it looks like you forgot to keep your fists up."

"Lesson learned," Free said.

He was still flying high off the adrenaline. They'd fought it out on the side of the highway, no weapons, just tooth and claw. He was used to fighting for food, but this was something different, a deeper and richer flavor of violence, tearing at those outsiders until their bodies stopped twitching. He'd taken down three of the wolverines all on his lonesome and another four with help from the other lions, but he hadn't noticed the claws coming for his face until it was too late.

The boss held out the kerchief and one of the other lions scurried forth and took it from his hand. He contemplatively licked a smear of blood off the pad of his thumb.

"Most of the animals we fight are just peasant vermin," he said. "But the smarter ones will know to take advantage of your blind side. Be wary. If you sustain another injury like that, then you're not my soldier. You're my dinner."

"Fair enough," said Free. "You'd better season me good, though. I just might give you the runs."

The lions eyed each other nervously, but the boss just snorted and the moment passed. "Dolph, I had my doubts when you pulled this one from the gutter, but I dare say you've proved them wrong tonight."

Dolph bowed. "Thank you, sir."

"Oh, pull that stick out of your ass." He gestured with his cane. "We're partying tonight, boys! Let the steak and saké flow!"

The foyer erupted with cheers and Free was struck by a fusillade of backslaps hard enough to nearly drive him to his knees. Dolph grabbed his elbow and pulled him straight again, shooing the others away as he guided Free to a quieter corner of the floor.

"I did good, yeah?" Free asked. He was starting to feel a little woozy.

“That’s what the boss says. Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

“And if I did good, you look good. That’s good!”

“I don’t give a damn about how I look,” Dolph said. “Everyone tells me I’m too uptight, but someone’s gotta watch out for crazy bastards like you.”

Free had been huffing the scent of his own blood all night. He was ravenous. Later he would stuff himself on meat and sleep half the next day, then hit the pavement looking for other saps to menace. This time last year he’d been licking the slime off plastic wrap. He couldn’t believe how his luck had changed.

“Hey, Dolph.”

“Hey, what?”

“I really appreciate this, man. I’m gonna do right by you, I swear.”

That got a smile out of him, which Free considered his biggest achievement tonight by far.

“Just take care of yourself,” said Dolph. “The rest will follow.”

* * *

The hiss of water underfoot teased him awake, and the pain followed in that sound like flotsam. There was a moment, just before he opened his eye, when he didn’t remember where he was, but it was gone before he could cherish it.

He had been made lesser.

Free hadn’t been properly tortured before. The other Families weren’t into that sort of thing, and even Agrippa and his band of wannabe commandos viewed it as distasteful; the only crook Free had known who’d practiced it had been, regrettably, the Shishigumi’s old boss. But he didn’t believe that it was usually as horrible as this. Being chained to the ceiling and beaten senseless with ropes was one thing, having the soles of your feet burnt with pokers another, but Karlov had mutilated him with delicate, joyless precision, with a dog’s love for the methodical.

All of Free’s canine teeth were gone, wrenched out of his head like the first and licked clean. The claws on every finger and toe were torn out. The pinky finger of his left hand and the ring finger of his right had both been chopped off, and he’d watched the Doberman suck away the fur and flesh from the severed digits and then crack them open to get at the marrow. He felt his right eyesocket sagging oddly; Karlov had scooped out the blind eye and popped it into his mouth like a grape. And at regular intervals there had been the camera-flashes, bursting in his head like bombs, a photo-collage of his degeneration, and it had had gone on and on like that, the cutting and the eating and the flash, until Free’s mind had mercifully let go and bore him down into unconsciousness once more. As darkness had risen up around him, he’d felt a final stinging pain in his backside, and watched Karlov walking from the room, gnawing on his fresh-cut tail like a rawhide bone.

The room was still empty, the cart and its tools in place. The throbbing pain in Free's mouth was so great he feared the pressure of it would pop out his other eye. He bent over and spat up a great goblet of blood, then groaned and reached up to touch his wounded face. And then he stopped. And stared.

There was his hand in front of him, its fingertips pink with blood. Unshackled. All the chair's restraints had been popped loose.

This was no dream. His imagination couldn't come up with pain like this. He stood up uncertainly, his mangled hide still oozing blood in a dozen places, and he took a few steps forward and nearly fell. His feet were in agony but worse was the loss of balance, his body struggling to compensate for all the little bits that Karlov had taken from it.

Free grit what was left of his teeth and limped to the door. It was unlocked. He pushed it open and peered into the dim and reeking hallway beyond. The sewage scent was nauseating, but there was something else beneath it. A perversely tantalizing whiff of iron and salt.

Chunks of meat had been laid like breadcrumbs from the doorway, leading into the corridor's depths. Free scooped up a chunk of the unidentifiable flesh and gave it another sniff. It was going gray, on the verge of spoil, but it still made his mouth water, the drool spilling out pink around his withered lips. He swallowed hard and let the meat fall. No telling if it was poisoned, and his mouth hurt too much to chew it properly anyway.

Nevertheless, he followed that smell through the thundering dark. He was more certain than ever that he was somewhere underground now, if not in the sewers then some uncharted sub-level. He'd heard stories about how deep the city ran, but he felt the pressure of it on his shoulders, an intangible weight that brought him near collapse. Somewhere high above, his comrades were waiting. Probably looking for him. With the Dokugumi and their new best friends on the prowl.

The trail of meat went on and on. There was enough here to feed the entire market for a day, and when he passed by other doors in the labyrinth he smelled even greater troves of slowly rotting flesh. The Butchers' stockpile, deliberately kept away from hungry mouths so that the black market would become a powder keg ready to blow.

Eventually the lumps terminated at another door, left partly ajar. Free pushed it open and found his way in a stairwell; he craned his head up and the flights went on and on, a sharp-edged spiral into infinity. He was overtaken by vertigo and stumbled back, almost falling on his freshly tail-less backside.

"So that's how you want it," he muttered. His missing canines made his tongue slip and slur.

He wasn't so stupefied by pain that he couldn't tell what was going on here. Someone had let him loose and baited him out. He very much doubted anyone but the Butchers knew about this maze, or that they would go against Pat and Karlov's will – if anyone in the group had wanted to show defiance, they'd have dared it a long time ago. Which meant that this was all a game to somebody. Free could either take these stairs, or go back to the maze, where Karlov and his tender ministrations waited.

It was no choice at all. They had cut away his options just like they'd cut away his parts.

Free gripped the railing and began to climb.

* * *

The Shishigumi were gathered in their HQ's dining room, their skimpy lunches untouched and long-congealed on their tables. They couldn't fool themselves any longer.

"Has he ever been gone this long?" said Dope, holding his useless phone. "He hasn't, right?"

"Not even close," Miguel said. He stood as if riveted to the spot, arms folded tight. All the lions were expressing their anxiety in different ways: Jimma chain-smoked on the nearby balcony; Hino was pacing a trail into the tatami mats; Sabu leaned against the wall, his foot tapping a relentless metronomic beat. Agata quailed in the room's far corner. Despite all his grumbling about how the others looked down on him, right now he felt like it was a good idea to let the grown-ups talk.

"Me and Sabu were hitting the bricks until eleven or so. Right, Sabu?" Dope asked, and Sabu nodded once. "The place is dead. Totally deserted. If anyone tried to jump Free then we'd have heard the racket for blocks."

"The Butchers slaughtered the Inarigumi without a peep, so I'm not convinced," Miguel growled. "God dammit. I shouldn't have let him go out on his own."

"Only option now is to contact the other Families," said Hino.

"Agrippa, you mean. I'd rather shove my arm into a garbage disposal than let him know about this."

"I know it's a risk, but what choice do we have? If the Butchers really are on the hunt then we'd be in deep shit even if we went out there as a group. At least the Dokugumi can give us backup."

Agata swallowed and stepped out from his corner. He felt like it was time to make a contribution.

"I got in touch with Louis earlier and he hasn't heard anything from Free either," he said. "But maybe if we asked him again, he can do something that...that might...help?"

He trailed off, because everyone had gone very still and silent. The other lions all stared. Miguel's mouth hung open. Sabu's eyes bulged above his kerchief.

"You called Louis?" Dope asked. "When?"

It took Agata a little while to get his mouth working again. The room was sweltering hot all of a sudden. His mane felt like he'd wrapped his head in a wool sweater during midsummer.

"A couple hours ago," he said at last, and Hino dashed off. "I just asked if he'd heard from Free, that's all. We were calling him all the time anyway, so I thought..."

His words dried up under Miguel's stare. From the balcony, Hino and Jimma's voices could be heard, shouting something indistinct.

"Dope, do you have his number?" Miguel asked.

"Already dialed." Dope wouldn't take his eyes off Agata, who'd started trembling in place, his paws greasy with sweat. Miguel walked over and Agata flinched as he held out his hand, but he just gave the young lion's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Relax," he said. A few seconds later, Dope lowered the phone from his ear.

"He's not answering," he said.

Miguel nodded, thoughtfully. Agata started to talk again, to apologize or at least to ask what he needed to apologize for, and then Miguel's fist smashed into his face with wrecking-ball force. Agata was knocked flat on his back and there he stayed, curled up and whimpering, his hands cupped over his bleeding muzzle.

Miguel wiped his knuckles on his suit jacket and turned back to the other lions. "We're going out there. All of us, now. We don't stop until we find them both, understood?"

Sabu pushed away from the wall and made for the exit at once. The other lions followed suit. Miguel was the last, and he grabbed Agata by the scruff of his neck and hoisted him back to his feet. Those round, dark eyes – so much younger than the rest of them, no matter how much he denied it – were bigger than ever, swimming with tears.

"Wipe off your damn face," Miguel told him. "You're coming, too."

* * *

The Shishigumi's HQ was full of terraces and balconies, some dangerously rickety, all offering a splendid view of the market below. Ibuki was on the hind balcony on the second floor from the top, smoking. It was a muggy night, cloudless, the lopsided half-moon like a luminescent wound in the starry sky. Louis was asleep on the floor above. If he concentrated, Ibuki could hear the gentle rhythm of his breath.

Free leaned on the rail beside him.

"Nice night," he said.

Ibuki blew smoke. "My mane always gives me grief this time of year."

"That's why you gotta style it." He swept back his pompadour and grinned. "I think it'd suit you."

"I'll take your word for it. Smoke?"

"I'm good, thanks."

"You're a total Silverhead but you barely touch cigarettes. I don't get it."

Free shrugged. "I like to save 'em for special occasions."

"Can't fault you for that."

Their small talk dispersed. The twinkling lights beneath printed their ghosts on Ibuki's glasses. Around the two of them, the decrepit tower and moaned as the rest of the Shishigumi settled in for the night. There were fewer of them than there'd been several months ago. Louis' election to the Shishigumi's leadership position hadn't gone over well with everybody.

"We have any more breakaways?" Free asked Ibuki.

"Not in the last week. Most of them left before Louis had a chance to prove himself."

"Still, that's...what, half of us? Gone with the wind, huh." He spat over the rail. "Good fuckin' riddance."

"Their decision was premature. Who knows, some of them might even come back."

"They'd better have one sweet and sloppy apology prepared if they do." Free tilted his head, closed his eye. "Kid's out like a light."

"Yes. Sleeping sounder than he has in a while."

"Makes sense, after you finally gave him a proper meal," Free said, and grinned as Ibuki almost swallowed his cigarette. "Relax, man. It ain't exactly a secret. And he's been choking down steak for long enough to make his point already."

Ibuki finished hacking out smoke and looking pleadingly at Free. "Nonetheless, I'd appreciate if you didn't spread it around. For Louis' sake, if nothing else."

"Yeah, I get what you mean. He's tougher than he lets on, but not half as tough as he wants to be." He rubbed his scarred eye, his grin gaining a rueful edge. "Still, I'm sure it helps that you're lookin' out for him."

Ibuki had been the one to spearhead the deer's election, and it had been such a runaway success that he'd effectively become the Shishigumi's second-in-command from his proximity to Louis alone. No one had really complained about that, at least; many of them had in fact privately speculated that Ibuki would be one of the prime candidates to succeed the old boss when he finally kicked the bucket. He was reserved, bookish, but still capable of ripping someone in half when necessary, a vital counterbalance to the lions' tendency for superstition and mystical thinking. But as Louis had racked up success after success in their territory – out-maneuvering the other gangs, expanding their protection rackets, regaining control over the livestock trade – the Shishigumi had changed with him, and Ibuki the most of all. While the rest of them had mellowed out, his quiet dedication to Louis had acquired a fervor that was almost religious.

All of them had noticed this. Free said nothing, but the question still unspooled between the two of them, and Ibuki answered.

"It's not just because he brought us to the top," Ibuki said. "Though I know that part's important."

"You got some herbivore sympathies? Because of..." Free traced his claw in the air, roughly mapping out the butcher's diagram under Ibuki's suit, where he'd also been marked for consumption. Ibuki's glasses glinted as he followed the gesture, and he turned back to the city lights, his cigarette a glowing stub between his fingers.

He said, "I love him, Free."

Free didn't answer. The shadows cloaked his face.

"Call it paternal instinct, or over-protectiveness, or just plain stupidity. But I can't think of any other word for it. I always felt like I'd been living life on pause. That the Shishigumi was just a way to kill time before the inevitable. But whatever he thinks of us, when I see him settle in here, changing things this way...the black market is better now. I feel better now. Like I've finally made a difference in the world, however brief or small." He hissed twin jets of smoke out his nostrils. "But he might just be killing time here, too. Someday, he might decide to leave. I don't think I'd be able to control myself if that happened. My fangs itch just thinking about it."

"Attacking the boss without permission?" Free asked. He idly picked a bit of food from between his own teeth. "You know what I'd have to do."

"Yes. I'm counting on it."

Free nodded. "Quick and clean."

"Thank you," said Ibuki. "You've always been good to me, Free. You and Dolph both."

"Man, don't pull that big-brother shit. You're five years older than me."

"You could've been the boss, too. If you'd wanted it."

Free scoffed. "I don't. Always knew what I wanted out of life and that ain't it."

"I never did," said Ibuki. "I never even thought to look. But for the first time, I can say this has been a good life. One worth living."

Free went quiet again but his tail swished back and forth, as if signaling its own response to Ibuki's words. Then, Free removed a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and put one between his lips, and Ibuki held out his lighter and struck. The flame leapt and caught. They stayed there for a time, their smoke staining silver in the city's dirty light.

* * *

The stairs had gone on forever. Free didn't know how long he'd climbed, or how old these steps really were; in numerous places their moldered green paint had long given way to bare concrete, which was itself pitted and furred with moss. How many of these stairwells and

passageways were there, driven like stakes into the city's heart? Leftovers from old wars. The Butchers had colonized these relics of their society's sordid past.

The ache in his feet eventually became so intense that they both went numb like blocks of wood, and after that his ascent was a little easier. He moved as carefully as he could, so as not to tear open his injuries again. He didn't let himself think of what might be waiting for him at the top. If nothing else, finishing this climb would grant him a chance to get some fresh air. Fresher, anyway.

When he reached the final flight, his throat was a burning flannel and his lungs felt full of ground glass. Laying off the cigarettes was seeming like a wiser decision all the time. He leaned against the rail until breathing didn't hurt so much and then shouldered through the stairwell door. The building it opened into was unremarkable, a gutted two-story structure the likes of which were scattered around the black market like carrion. These rotting wooden shells might have been used as shopfronts, warehouses, tenements, but eventually the damage became too severe and the building would be abandoned by all but the derelicts. This one was empty, the floor a mess of fallen roofbeams and broken glass. The sky could be glimpsed from cracks in the roof. Coal-grey, already growing darker.

Free tried to catch the scent of anything suspicious, but it was a useless effort. Every time he sniffed, all he could smell was his own blood. His bare and numbed feet crunched on broken glass as he headed for the entrance. He put his hand against the door, steeled himself, and then shoved it open.

The street outside was empty.

Still in the black market. There was no mistaking it – he'd walked this place since his legs could bear him up, and every inch of it was mapped into his blood and bone. This wasn't where the Butchers had carried him at first. The pavement's coloration was different, the street narrower, and his nose might have been diminished but it still would've picked up that sickening sulfur-and-ammonia cocktail in the air. He thought the Butchers must have these hidey-holes in every corner of the district.

He descended the stoop, looked to his left and right, then froze. There were several figures at the alleyway mouth on the right end of the street. The light was bad and his vision was dim, but from their posture they were as surprised to see him as he was.

No way to run. He was too ruined, and too exhausted from the climb. The figures were already walking to him, and he turned to greet them. Their yellow pelts almost glowed in the deepening dusk, the spots like holes in space. Cruce, and three of his Madaragumi henchman, all of them gripping their blades, their faces stiff with an expression he didn't have words to describe.

They came to a halt, swords jangling. Cruce could barely stand upright; a weak, thin sound leaked from deep within his throat. The bulkier leopard at his side – Diego, Free believed his name was – stared him down.

"You too," was all Free said.

“This isn’t personal, Free,” said Diego. “Our hand was forced.”

“So they posted you here just in case I came out? I knew those sick bastards were toying with me.” He looked at Cruce, who flinched from his gaze. “You disgusting piece of shit. All that moaning and crying over Renne, and you side with the animals who killed her?”

Cruce shuddered as if the words had cut him. “Agrippa said if I didn’t help then they’d come for us next. I couldn’t fight them. I’m sorry.”

“So you knew from that first meeting.” Free spat blood. “What, was flipping that table an act too? So you could distract us from figuring out the truth right then and there?”

“No act. I can’t change myself. Can’t even pretend.” Cruce was almost sobbing now. “I hate all of this, Free. But there’s no choice. No chance. All I can do now is keep them safe.”

“You dumb fuck.”

Free took a shambling step forward and the other three leopards clustered in front of Cruce, ready to unsheathe their blades. He sneered at them all.

“Your boys are all gonna die too, Cruce. You heard what the Butchers tried to do to that Legosi kid. They won’t leave anything behind for anyone. So congratulations. I guess Renne died for *nothing*.”

“Boss, get back to the hideout,” Diego said. “We’ll take care of this.”

Cruce shook his head. “It’s not right. I should be the one who-”

“There’s nothing right about any of this. Go home, Cruce. Please.”

Free wouldn’t even meet the leopard’s eye. He had his attention elsewhere, in the high windows and shadowed eaves around them. His matted mane prickled with invisible stares. They had an audience to all this. Maybe Karlov was among them, adjusting his camera.

Finally Cruce’s lips pursed and he slunk away from the group. They kept their bodies between him and Free as he disappeared into a side alley, and they didn’t speak again until the sound of his sandals on the pavement faded.

One of the other leopards said, “We really are sorry, Free. Truth be told, a lot of us kind of looked up to you guys in the Shishigumi. Feline solidarity, you know?”

“There’s no comparison,” Free said. “Every one of us is worth five of you cosplaying pricks. And we might’ve had some shit luck with bosses lately, but at least we never cracked our necks for some traitorous junkie.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Diego said harshly. “You ever ask yourself why Cruce’s addiction got so bad?”

“Like I give a shit.”

“It was for us,” Diego said. “We were always the weakest of the Four Families. We didn’t have your guts, or the lizards’ strength, or the foxes’ smarts...but we had Cruce. In his prime he was one of the best fighters here. He kept us in the running single-handedly.”

Free had to concede this was probably true. In his earlier days with the Shishigumi, he was told that challenging Cruce in a turf war without heavy backup and at least two escape routes was a death sentence.

“I can see you remember,” Diego said. “He was unstoppable. But he got old. Lost his edge. The Vine kept his skills sharp for a little while, but then it started to take everything else. Renne could’ve pulled him out of it, maybe. But now all he’s got is us. He ruined himself, for us.” He drew his blade, a thin streak of dull silver against the market’s gloomier grey. “So we’ll stand by him to the very end.”

The other leopards unsheathed their swords in turn. Free clenched his fists.

Diego said, “On your knees, Free. We’ll make it quick. We can do that, at least.”

“Ain’t you an honorable bunch,” Free said, his words basted in venom. “You’re even more of a joke than those butter knives you carry around.”

“They’ll cut you just fine,” Diego growled.

Free chuckled. “Your dumbass code’s got it all backward. You don’t stick your necks out while the boss runs and hides. The boss takes responsibility. Always.”

He reached up with a bloody hand, slicked back his mane, and started to walk. And though he had neither fangs nor claws to bare and his knees buckled with every step, something in his remaining eye made the leopards’ swords shake in their hands.

“Come on,” said Free. “I’ll show you how a real beast fights.”

* * *

There was no way for Louis to disguise what he was. His antlers would give him away to any animal in line of sight, and he’d neither the time nor the inclination to saw them off before leaving the manor. With the black market on the brink of starvation, even the price-tag gambit he’d pulled on his last visit wouldn’t save him, and here he was now, a lean slab of herbivore flesh in the prime of its youth, walking with a limp. He’d might as well have swan-dived into a food processor.

But he walked through empty streets. The market had become a tomb. His over-keyed senses would occasionally pick up the creak of a window shutter or the whiff of carnivore pelts from underneath a doorway, but it had already been over twenty minutes since he’d stepped through the district’s main gate and he still hadn’t seen anyone. The place had undergone an unsettling transformation since he’d last checked in on it. The pulse of life that ran through it had been stilled.

As he delved deeper and deeper into the market's byroads he once again feared being eaten, but not by the carnivores. The architecture itself called to mind a monstrous digestive tract, pushing him onward to some grisly fate. The morning mist had thickened to a fog that softened the edges of everything. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to find the way out.

It didn't matter, he thought. Escape was irrelevant; he came here to make a rendezvous and he had no intention of leaving until then. The pistol dug through his ribs. His bad leg had started to ache with a rotted heat against the afternoon chill.

Louis was growing annoyed with himself. These were supposed to be *his* streets; Ibuki had taken him on patrol here more times than he could count, and he'd thought that he'd memorized every landmark. But with everything so lifeless the entire market had been rendered down into gray anonymity, the buildings with their sooty façades slouching and straightening in waves, the vacant lots like filthy oases in this asphalt desert. Where were the smells? Where was the food? One way or another, everything here depended on the meat trade. Take away the meat and you robbed the black market of its soul.

Legosi, I wish you were here.

The words appeared unbidden and he nearly bit through his tongue trying to force them down again. The last thing either of them needed was for Legosi to get mixed up in this again. Louis had pushed him to risk too much already.

His nose would make this trivial. He'd find Free. He can find anything.

"Shut up," Louis snapped. "He's not my *pet*. He's my-"

His gnawed leg flared and he grimaced and almost tripped. Louis caught himself and braced against a wall, waiting for the pain to ebb, his heartbeat to slow. And his treacherous mind just went on whispering.

What is he, Louis? That wolf. These lions. What are they to you?

This damned district. Choked with death, the aura of it baked right into the earth. It called out something dark inside you. This place would drive you mad if you gave it the chance.

He looked skyward. Through the blanket of clouds, he could barely make out the dim coin of the sun. It was dropping fast. Not dusk yet, but getting there. He had to finish this before nightfall. The Butchers might still be making their rounds.

Louis began to walk again and then stopped. The road in front of him was cramped but straight, and at a corner in the distance he could make out another animal, its silhouette rendered indistinct in all this monochrome murk. But as he watched, it turned and headed into a side alley, and Louis thought he saw a glint of glasses.

"This had better not be another hallucination," he muttered, and picked up the pace.

Down the alley there was nothing, not even footprints in the grime. He cursed to himself, but then listened more closely, ears flicking and swiveling like satellite dishes. Someone was

nearby. An unsteady step. Something scraping the ground beside them. Louis drew his pistol, then breathed deep and followed the sound.

It didn't take him long to find the other animal; they weren't exactly trying to be stealthy. He emerged onto a wider road to see them there, the unmistakable garb and pelt of the Madaragumi. The leopard walked like he had a weight cinched around his neck, shuffling drunkenly from side to side. Louis took aim at his back, his thumb on the pistol hammer.

"Turn around," he said. "Slowly."

The leopard froze, and turned, and Louis' heartbeat skipped. They'd never met in person, but Ibuki had told him about this one. A red-eyed, snaggle-toothed ruin of a feline. The only member of the Madaragumi who could get away with looking this way was Cruce, the gang's once-fearsome, now-fallen boss.

Cruce's jaw went a little slacker when he saw Louis. Apparently, he'd recognized him as well, even though his brain was a fistful of decaying clay.

"You," he said.

"Me," Louis agreed. "Where's the rest of your gang?"

"You shouldn't be here," said Cruce. "Market-prince. You shouldn't."

"I asked you a straightforward question. Answer it or I'll put a bullet in your knee."

"They're in the hideout. Hiding. From Agrippa, from Pat. From everyone." He paused. "Except the ones who're killing Free."

Louis nearly pulled the trigger – there was a fatal moment where his vision flashed red. But then it passed, and Cruce looked almost disappointed. His sword slipped from his hand and clattered to the pavement, and with that same shuffling step, he approached Louis.

"Stay back," Louis said. Cruce kept coming. "I said stay back!"

"The lions are all alone now," Cruce said, voice quavering. "Pat took the rest. Us and the Dokugumi both. He takes, and takes, and he leaves nothing for anyone. You never should have come back, market-prince. There's nothing here for you."

Louis' grip on the pistol tightened. "I don't give a damn if you're one of the Family's leaders, if you take one more step forward then I swear I'll—"

He didn't know it was possible for an animal to move this fast. There hadn't even been a blur, just Cruce a half-dozen paces away one moment and right in his face the next, pistol barrel clasped in his hands, shoved into his forehead. This burst of agility seemed to have damaged him even further; there was a scum of froth around his lips, and those bloodshot eyes glimmered with rheum. His breath was a rancid jungle reek, toxic plantlife turning to loam.

"Do it," he said.

“Get the hell away from me!”

“You want to kill me. So kill me. Whatever’s left of me to kill.” Tear-trails stained Cruce’s filthy fur. “Living was hard enough already. And then Renne. I could’ve done something to help her. But I was too weak. So weak I can’t even die. The others won’t let me go.” He pulled the pistol harder, grinding its barrel into his skin. “I can’t go on like this. Not even the Vine makes it easier anymore. You were supposed to be the one who’d save us. So save me. Kill me! *Please kill me!*”

Louis’ left hand abandoned the pistol and reached into his coat, and before Cruce could react he drove the silver shard of his switchblade into the leopard’s side. Cruce cried out and released the gun, took several swaying steps back, and sat down against a wall. He started to cry. Long, heaving, desolate sobs. Louis looked down at him, so dumbfounded he didn’t even raise the gun again.

“It’s not fair,” Cruce wept. “I knew she was just using me. I was fine with it. It was the only time...the only time I thought I could be better. Why did she have to pay for it like that? Why us? Why Free? We pay and we pay...”

“Tell me where he is,” Louis said. “Please.”

Cruce lifted a withered arm and pointed the way he’d come. “There. No one else is around. You can listen for him. But it doesn’t matter. It’s too late for all of us. And it’ll only get later.”

Louis sheathed his knife and started off. But as he passed Cruce, he stopped, and spared one last glance at the leopard.

“Whining about your weakness won’t help. You think it’s all hopeless? Then at least go down fighting.” He started off again. “That’s what a proper carnivore would do.”

Cruce rose his head then, and turned to Louis. But the deer was already too far away to make out, the crown of his antlers hovering disembodied in the thickening fog.

* * *

The lions hadn’t had much time to repair the office Legosi had wrecked. They’d blacked out Melon’s name first – the fewer reminders they had of that mutant, the better – and boarded over the smashed window, but the clawmarks in the walls and floor were still there, and the boards did nothing to hold back the drafts. On a windy day it would be impossible to keep any papers in place unless you nailed them down first.

No one would have said anything if Free had just moved everything to a different part of the tower. They had plenty of space, after all. But he stayed put. This was the boss’s office.

He was there now, behind the desk, hands folded. The black square of runneled paint where the Shishigumi’s insignia had once been loomed over his head. In front of him stood Louis, swaddled in the rags of livestock, a placard around his neck displaying his “price.” One hundred million, discounted for defective product. The wind that blew in between the boards plucked at both the clothes and the sign.

"I'm sorry about Dolph," he said.

"So am I," said Free.

Silence fell. Louis nervously smoothed out his rags. Normally eloquent, the deer seemed to be at a loss for words.

Jimma and Hino had encountered him strolling through the black market that evening and almost had a pair of heart attacks on the spot. The disguise wasn't bad and the market was still shellshocked from what had happened at the Day of Depravity earlier that week, but this type of suicidal gesture wasn't in-character for him. They'd told Free that Louis had insisted they escort him to the HQ, over their strenuous objections. And now that Louis was finally here, he looked like he very much wanted to leave.

"Good to know Melon's finally dead, at least," Louis said. "Should I sit down?"

"No. This won't take long."

"Oh. Okay."

Free was usually the most expressive of the lions, but right now his face was stiff and harsh as a weathered rock. "Why are you here? Just offering condolences?"

"I had a...premonition, I guess you could call it. That you were all in trouble. And with the way you all seemed to hurry away from me after our meeting at that research society, I expected the worst. So here I am." He looked down at his placard and snorted. "Maybe not my wisest decision, but it worked out in the end."

"Did it."

The chairlegs squealed as Free got up. He was a head and a half taller than Louis, not counting the antlers, and the deer's confident expression faltered a bit as Free approached. But he rallied one more time.

"I'm not surprised to see you as the Shishigumi's leader," he said. "For what it's worth, I think you're more than qualified."

Free held out his hand. "Give me that sign."

Louis' brow creased. "What?"

"Give me the fucking sign!" Free shouted.

Louis flinched, cringing like Free was about to strike him, and he fumbled off the placards around his neck so hastily that the rope snagged in his antlers. He untangled it and gave the signs to Free, who held them tight, the wood cracking between his fingers.

"Do you have any idea what I've done?" Free asked. "I shot my Family's boss in full view of every gang in the city. We're finished. There isn't a Shishigumi anymore. Just a handful of two-bit crooks waiting for the axe to fall. And now you show up to put your head on the

chopping block next to ours, telling the whole goddamn world that you're for sale? That you're damaged fucking goods?!" He threw down the signs and stomped them to splinters. "This is what I killed Ibuki for?!"

"That's not what you told me!" Louis said. His composed tone had gone high and reedy, like he was shedding years before Free's eye. "Ibuki accepted it. You all did! You said that-"

Free grabbed Louis' antler and the deer cried in protest as he was pulled in close, so they were almost nose to nose. Free's fangs were bared and slick with froth, his muzzle wrinkled, nostrils suffocating Louis in their swampy jets of air. He could see fear curdling on Louis' face, and while some distant part of him shouted for him to stop, the rest wanted to see more.

"I don't know what he was thinking," Free said. "That idiot was convinced you were the only decent thing to come in or out of this hellhole in a long time, but right now I just see another worthless fucking herbivore with a death wish. Take a look around. You notice how far we've fallen since you got bored with us? Ibuki was just the start. We sacrificed everything to keep your spoiled ass safe, and you still won't stay away! What else is it going to take? How many more of us have to die before you're satisfied?!"

Louis was shaking all over now; he looked on the verge of tears. In his wide, dark herbivore's eyes, Free could see himself reflected, his jagged teeth bared in their hateful rictus. All his strength fled him at that sight.

"Free, please stop," Louis said, his voice a thin whisper. "I'm your friend."

Free released the antler like it burned and stepped back, the broken sign crunching underfoot. He leaned against the desk and spoke while staring at the boarded window. He couldn't look at that face again.

"If you really mean that, then leave. I don't ever want to see you in the black market again. No threats this time. Just stay gone. If you die here, that means all of this was for nothing. Understand?" Out the corner of his eye, Free saw Louis nod. "Jimma! Hino! Get your asses in here!"

The two peeked their heads through the doorway. Free could smell the others out in the hall; the entire gang had been listening in on this row.

"What do you need, boss?" Hino asked. Free noted the bitterness in that last word.

"Our guest is leaving," he said. "Put some decent clothes on him and get him out of my fucking sight."

They led him away. As they went outside, Free heard them muttering something, reassurances, apologies, all of which were coming much too late. The floors creaked as the rest of the eavesdropping lions dispersed; Free was left alone in the vandalized office. He paced the room and stopped behind the couch, sinking his claws into the leather upholstery. Louis had sat here a year ago, not long after his coronation, trying awkwardly to smoke cigarettes with the rest of them like he'd carried the habit his whole life.

Free's growl rumbled his ribcage and he gripped the couch harder. His suit-sleeves bulged as he lifted it, raised it over his head even as something hot and dark went pop in his shoulder blade; he'd be nursing that arm for the next three weeks. The growl built, leapt, and with a frustrated scream Free slammed the couch onto the coffee table and smashed it to bits with an impact that rocked the tower to its foundation.

* * *

He trailed color in his wake. His blood painted the road in smears and ellipses like a communication in Morse; his bloody handprints marked the walls, its bright scarlet already turning dull as if the market itself was drinking it away. He listened to the sound of his own breath. There was nothing else left.

The Madaragumi's swords had been sharper than Free had credited. He was carved deep in numerous places, scoring the shallower wounds that Karlov had left earlier. One cut on his neck hadn't reached the artery but still wouldn't stop bleeding, painting his right half with gore. His right hand was a useless stump; its remaining fingers had been cut to the bone when he'd grabbed Diego's sword, giving him the opening he'd needed to smash his skull into the pavement. Still, the leopards would probably live. He couldn't say the same for himself. His respiration called to mind the pump and wheeze of bad machinery and the world around him was growing fainter by the minute.

But his instincts forced him to keep going.

This was the last of a feline's fatalistic tendencies – all their mysticism and divinations, their so-called connection with a world unseen, terminated here. When a feline knew they were at death's door, they would slink off and find a quiet place to pass on. More than anything else, this may have been what fueled their species' antisocial reputation, compared to the canines. The latter surrounded themselves with friends whenever possible. The former were compelled to die alone.

But he couldn't manage it. Those insufferable unseen gazes still itched at him no matter how long he walked. There was a funeral procession of Butchers all around, hiding in the death-haze of his failing eye. He couldn't escape them.

You assholes, he thought wearily. *Can't I just die in peace? You won't even give me that much?*

He could barely see at all now. The road ahead wavered in and out of an all-consuming black, like a cosmic light switch was being flicked. But in those moments of light, he thought he glimpsed someone ahead, leaning against the wall. A tall lion, well-built, the cross-shaped scar on his face seeming to glow with its own radiance.

"Wait a little longer," he croaked.

His legs felt foreign from the rest of him. His body coming untethered from the earth. But he kept walking, and though the shade of Dolph disappeared from his vision, the murk coalesced into another shape. Slim and short, its head crowned with sharp edges.

“Free,” it said.

He blinked, and blinked again, and there was Louis, the mist curling around his antlers like gauze.

“Free!” he cried, and ran up to him. His hands hovered around his numerous injuries. “God, what did they do to you? No, we can save that for later. We need to get you somewhere safe. The HQ, or even that obnoxious doctor’s clinic...”

Free shoved him away, hard enough so that he stumbled and almost fell. Louis looked back at him, confused and hurt, but there was no anger in Free’s expression this time. Just desperation.

“Louis, they’re following me,” he said. “You have to-”

Three gunshots rang out. Free’s body jerked three times. With a sigh, he dropped to his knees and fell forward and did not move again.

Louis stared at the bullet holes in Free’s back. They were in a roughly triangular pattern, oozing fresh blood. Tried as he might, he couldn’t discern the significance of them. The street around him seemed too narrow and wide at once, as if the whole district had released a long-held breath. Then he looked up, and the camera-flash in the distance was like a shooting star.

Karlov lowered his camera and grinned. Beside him, a blank-faced panther stood with pistol raised. Its barrel was still smoking.

“It’s just as I thought,” Karlov said. “The best shots are often unexpected.”

“*Bastard!*” Louis screamed, and reached into his coat – but then he felt a hand around his ankle, and looked down to see Free’s face turned, his eye wide and feverish. He realized that these two animals across from him weren’t the only ones. He felt eyes from the windows, the rooftops, around the alleys at his back.

“Karlov the Doberman,” said the photographer. “I hadn’t expected us to meet, Louis. At best I thought that Free here would encounter his comrades-in-arms and I’d be able to record their faces for posterity. But I couldn’t have possibly hoped for better circumstances than these. You may have just become my masterpiece.”

“Do you think that you’ll get away with this?” Louis said, voice thick with fury. “Even if the Shishigumi don’t slaughter the lot of you, if you let me go, then I promise to bring every *ounce* of this society’s wrath down on the Butchers. What you did to the Inarigumi will look like a mercy in comparison. Or...you can shoot me here.” He spread his arms wide. “And the same thing will happen. It’s no secret where I’ve gone. You won’t survive the retaliation. So make your move, you son of a bitch!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Karlov replied smoothly, and Louis’ arms lowered, his expression suddenly uncertain. “A hard rain is coming soon, prince. There won’t be any time for vengeance. If you’d like to take it for yourself, why, here’s your opportunity.” He held out his

own arm, the other hand still holding the camera. “Go on and take the shot. Of course, I can’t promise what my colleagues here might do in response.”

Louis’ hand crept back to his coat, but the closer it got, the harder Free’s claws dug into his ankle. Several seconds passed, and then Karlov laughed and snapped off another photo, making Louis wince.

“A fitting epilogue. The moment that the prince of the black market finally realized his own weakness.” Karlov’s grin grew wider, crazed; he pulled at the sweater he wore so that the fibers parted, and underneath it Louis glimpsed a horrorscape of raw flesh. “We can’t change what we are. Can’t hide the *spoil* and *rot* and *stink* beneath these skins. It was foolish of you to even try. If you do somehow live through what’s to come, I hope you carry that knowledge with you forever. Let it fester in your gut, little deer. Until you finally work up the courage to go on the block with the rest of us.” He whistled, and all the shadows around them shuddered. “And feel free, ha ha, to leave that carcass where it’s fallen. We’ll return for it, don’t you worry. We have a place for all that meat.”

Karlov waved, his companion holstered their gun, and the two of them turned and sauntered back into the fog. Little by little, the figures around them also receded, the prickle of their stares leaving Louis’ pelt. He and Free were alone. But he could still hear the lion’s breathing.

“Piece of shit set this all up,” Free said, and hacked fresh blood. “What a goddamn mess.”

Louis knelt down. “Don’t talk.”

“You’ve gotta hear this. I woke up before they started carving me. I know where they are. Where they’re hiding.” His hand released Louis and dropped to the pavement. “Tell Miguel about the old laundry off Dogtooth Square. Where we thought they shut down ‘cause of the smell. Tell him.”

“I’m not your damn messenger. You’ll tell him yourself.”

“That’s not happening. I’m done. But it’s okay.” He laughed weakly and it turned into another wet cough. “I never should’ve blamed you for any of this. It was my fault. The black market went to hell ‘cause I couldn’t keep myself in check. There’s no escaping that. The boss has to take responsibility.”

Louis stared. His muzzle wrinkled. Then he picked up Free’s arm with a grunt – the one limb felt heavy as a tree trunk – and draped it over his own shoulders. He sidled under Free’s prone body, his false leg rattling, careful not to stab the lion with his antlers. What was left of Free’s face twisted in confusion.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Taking responsibility,” Louis said.

Free was now half-off the ground, nuzzled against Louis cheek to cheek, his blood seeping warm through the deer’s jacket. Louis planted his feet, grit his teeth, and with a heave of

exertion he stood up, carrying Free with him. The lion was still so tall that the tips of his shoes rested comfortably on the ground. Louis' knees shuddered with the weight. His chewed leg was already in agony.

Free let out more hacking laughter. "You crazy bastard. You won't get two steps before I crush your scrawny ass."

"Shut up," Louis panted. "It's clear you're unfit to lead the Shishigumi in your current state. I'm taking back the position until you're healed." He tightened his grip on Free's arms. "We're going home."

He took a step, and then another. And then a third. The pain in his leg was bad, and the prosthetic wobbled perilously under the burden he carried, but Louis told himself that it could only get so much worse, that eventually it would reach a threshold that he simply wouldn't recognize. He catalogued the raging aches in his leg, his back, his lungs, and pushed them all aside, carrying Free through the silent market.

"Incredible," said Free.

"I told you to shut up. You'll live longer."

"Ibuki was right about you. The whole time." Louis felt Free's smile against his skin. "Hey, Louis. I know we weren't together all that long. But that time...it was good. You were really good."

He finally fell silent. For a second Louis almost collapsed, but he spat defiantly onto the cobbles and lifted himself up again. He measured his heartbeats between steps. One after another, until he reached the end.

* * *

Many of the Shishigumi had lived in this district their whole life, but suddenly it had turned into a foreign country for them. The animals who lived and worked here had disappeared, been replaced with something intangible and wicked. Jimma barely recognized the streets anymore. Dope kept seeing movement where there was none. Agata huddled between Hino and Miguel, even though the latter had just bloodied his nose, barely able to conceal his fright. This place no longer wanted them here.

They'd attempted their mane-tracking divination again and even that was failing. The wet, misty air weighed the hairs down, so that they couldn't point in any one direction. Miguel clutched the limp strands in his fist and couldn't help but take it as an omen. Even the weather was calling out Pat's name.

"How long have we been out here?" Jimma asked.

"About half an hour," said Dope. "If we'd been going in a straight line then we would've hit the market's edge by now. But we keep getting turned around."

“Can’t hear a thing either,” Hino muttered. “It’s oppressive. Miguel, still no luck with the hairs?”

Miguel shook his head, then stopped. One of them was wavering – the darkest, from Agata’s mane. It stood out like a line of graphite amidst all this gray.

“Follow me,” he said, and took off. They did so, Sabu taking the rear, his gun out and ready.

The twitching of that hair was so faint that it could have just been a figment of Miguel’s imagination, but he followed it anyway, not even looking up to see where he was going. And as they walked, the lions picked up a new scent amidst all this ashy grey nothing. Blood, coppery and fresh. A little further, and they heard a ragged, uneven step, slightly metallic on every other beat. They were close to running now.

They turned a corner, and then another. And then Miguel stopped, so suddenly that Agata plowed into his back. All the lions stared at Louis, standing there blood-soaked from head to toe, Free draped limply over his shoulders.

“There you are,” he said hoarsely. “Take this idiot off me, would you?”

They didn’t speak. No words seemed suitable for them. They just rushed forward and lifted Free off Louis, and then the deer collapsed back, his legs splayed out before him. His breath rattled like a cupful of dice. The blood seeping through his left pantleg, where his prosthetic was joined to his flesh, smelled different than the rest.

“He’s been shot,” Louis said, as the lions laid Free out. “Among other things, as you can see. You have to get him medical attention now. Bring him to Gouhin’s clinic. He’ll put up a fuss but he won’t dare turn you away. Not to impose, but I’d appreciate if one of you could help me walk, as well. I’d like to be there with him.”

Free lay still, eye closed, smiling gently. Miguel ran his hands over the lion’s mutilated body, pressed a finger to his neck. He and Dope exchanged a glance. Miguel shook his head.

“Don’t bother tallying his injuries, you’ll be there all day,” said Louis. “Let’s just go.”

The wind picked up, blowing cold over them all. Miguel and Dope stood and placed their hands over their hearts. Sabu bowed his head, his pistol shaking. Hino and Jimma tried to approach Louis, but cautiously, as if the deer had a hissing fuse wired to his chest.

“I said let’s go! You can save the damned theatrics for when Free gets better!” His voice cracked. “Why won’t anyone *listen* to me?!”

Agata dropped to his knees and hugged Louis tight, their heartbeats thundering through their clothes. Louis could hear Agata sobbing into his shoulder. He looked up at the cloud-smothered skies. The rain was warm against his face.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “I just don’t understand.”

His Crown Conceals a Bloody Scalp

He awoke to softness under his head and the smell of clean linen. The sheets were cool against his skin but a sick heat emanated from his leg, under the taut wrappings of fresh gauze. He had a few seconds of relief before the pain bubbled up through that warmth. With the pain came the memories.

He opened his eyes to slits, gray light seeping in. It took a moment for them to fully adjust but he didn't need them to sense his father's presence. Oguma's scent was as seemingly unchangeable as the rest of him – stag fur, pressed wool, a faint mist of fine cologne. He expected to see him towering at his bedside like before, but this time he was seated, the prosthetic leg in his hands. Its socket was speckled with blood like spots of mold. Oguma didn't look at it, kept his gaze trained on the far wall even as Louis' sheets rustled, but he turned the leg over and over in his hands, restlessly, delicately, like it was a snowglobe.

“Here you are again,” he said.

Louis didn't answer. This was not his bedroom; a year ago, after the incident with Riz, Oguma had converted one of the manor's spare rooms into a sickroom just in case there was some sort of complication with his leg, outfitted it with a top-quality adjustable bed and the best monitoring and intravenous equipment civilian money could buy. The room hadn't been needed and so it had simply been forgotten, left shut like countless others. Judging by the lack of must in the air, it must have been cleaned recently, but dust motes still danced in the morning light. The windowglass was dry, no raindrops yet, but the clouds overhead held dark tinges like veins of iron.

Free was dead.

“Your associates delivered you to us,” said Oguma. “They also relieved you of your weapons. I'm given to understand that your excursion yesterday did not go well.”

How many steps had he taken before the heat of Free's breath was no longer felt. How long before he'd forced himself to believe that his heart now beat for both of them. All that blood. The memory of it still felt more real than anything in this soft chamber.

Oguma's droned on, the leg ceaselessly rotating beneath his fingertips.

“You were given a brief medical examination overnight. Your blood loss was minimal, but what remains of your leg has suffered considerable damage. You will find it difficult to walk in any capacity for some time. If you should place it under that kind of strain again, you may become unable to walk at all, with or without a prosthetic. Neither of us would find that desirable.”

“I understand,” Louis said dully. “I won't go out again. Wouldn't want to damage your investment, after all.”

The leg stopped turning. Oguma radiated stillness. Louis looked up at him, but could only see the side of his head, the edge of his glasses' shine.

"My investment," he said, breaking off the syllables like hard candy.

He reached over and seized Louis' antler and pulled, and Louis shouted in pain as his bandaged stump dragged over the bedsheets, but the shout went dead in his throat when Oguma looked at him fully. For the first time he could remember, the thin eyes behind his glasses were veined with red, and sunken into the stag's skull as if they were in danger of falling in completely. And yet when Oguma kept talking, the words were dry and measured as ever, so that it was like Louis was looking at two animals at once, some stressed and weary creature that had invaded and puppeteered his father's skin.

"You're weak, Louis," he said. "An animal with your deprived upbringing will never match the strength of those lions, or even herbivores like myself. But where do you think true power comes from? Is it strength? Wealth? No. The only thing that matters in this world is *will*." The hand on Louis' antler tightened. "That is what you demonstrated the day I dragged you from that tower, when you put a knife to your throat rather than succumb meekly to your predators."

"Father, you're hurting me." Somehow Louis kept his voice steady, but Oguma went on like he hadn't even heard.

"We cannot change what we are. The willfulness that's made you such an exceptional child will hound you forever. I can't keep you caged here no more than you can remain idle. It's in your nature to run. So where will you run to, Louis, while those legs can still carry your weight? And what will you do when you're cornered at last?"

He let go. Louis fell back into the cushions, rubbing his scalp, and then stopped as Oguma rose. The stag's many-pronged shadow stretched across the room, and he put the leg down at Louis' side and walked stiffly to the exit. Louis watched dumbfounded as Oguma opened the door, stopped at the threshold.

"As for my so-called investment, the terms of your adoption were transactional, but not conditional." A pause. "You will always be my son."

He stepped out and closed the door behind him. Louis reached up and touched his antler. It was still warm.

The plushness of the mattress embraced him. He could imagine the feel of the pillow against his head and the thought alone made his eyelids heavy. Instead he whipped the sheets off the bed (his body underneath in shapeless white pajamas, the harsh angles of his bones outlined in the fabric) and swung his leg over the edge, toward the door. The heat in his stump flared like a tinderbox as he strapped on his prosthetic, but he paid it no mind.

Louis grabbed the bedframe and prepared to rise, then stopped. Leaning against the wall beside the bed was a wooden cane, its varnished body the color of his pelt. It was austere, unornamented, but when he picked it up its heft made it clear how much care had gone into his construction. It still bore a trace of his father's cologne.

Louis stepped out into the hall, hobbling on the cane. The manor's atmosphere was sepulchral. No bodyguards or servants made themselves known as he crossed the halls to his bedroom. He thought of leaving a note for Yuta, some kind of apology, but there was already far too much to do.

His bedroom was untouched. No sign of the clothes he'd worn; they had probably been discarded, too bloodsoaked to be salvageable. He looked for his phone and saw it charging on his desk. Oguma had thought of everything.

He peeled off his pajamas and went to his closet. What he wanted was in the back, near where his gun had been stored. He groped among the hangers and pulled out a garment bag, threw it on his bed, unzipped it. Inside was a tailored suit, black-on-charcoal like it had been woven from cumulonimbus, its tie the color of dried blood. This had been what he'd worn on his way back from the Shishigumi's tower, two months and a hundred years ago.

Louis sat down heavily on the bed. He gathered up the fabric in his arms and pressed it to his face and inhaled deeply. Musty wood. Lion fur. Silvervine.

He wiped his eyes and got dressed.

* * *

The Shishigumi had slept poorly last night, and though the sun had risen several hours ago most of them were still in their rooms. They thrashed among their bedding, self-medicated with what alcohol or Silvervine they still had. Their doors were shut but the tower groaned with their movements, as if the place was haunted by the living. Miguel, who'd been pacing the halls for a while, thought it was appropriate. They were dead animals walking anyway.

When they'd found Louis, Agata's hug had snapped him out of his delusion that Free was still alive, but he'd had gone nearly catatonic after that. Agata had gently convinced him to unlock his phone so they could call his father and arrange a rendezvous, and Miguel and Sabu had brought him to the market's outskirts, leaving the others to deal with Free. A jet-black limousine had pulled up in front of them, and out had stepped a be-suited stag whose physique nearly matched Miguel's own, the slit eyes behind his glasses reminding him unsettlingly of Ibuki. They'd handed over Louis, who'd passed out from exhaustion, and then Miguel had held out the deer's pistol. No one had spoken but the lions' faces had communicated it well enough – if there was a further price to be paid for this, they were willing to pay it. Oguma had just shaken his head, pressed the gun back to Miguel's chest, and returned to the car. The last thing Miguel had seen before the door swung shut was Oguma sitting ramrod-straight, holding his unconscious son's hand.

They'd gone home and buried Free beside Dolph. There was no ceremony. This atrocity didn't deserve the dignity of eulogies. Louis had carried his corpse a long way; Jimma said that he'd traced the blood trail the two of them had left, and it had taken him almost five minutes at a brisk walk. God only knew what Louis must have felt going such a distance on that false leg, with Free's dead weight borne up on his back.

Miguel descended the stairs to the ground floor, cautiously, in case one of them broke underfoot. This place was coming apart fast. It had been an uphill battle getting anyone to do

maintenance back when they'd numbered in the dozens, and that was over a year ago. Parties that went on for days. Feasts so lavish they'd needed a mop to clean up afterward. He'd kept out of them more and more towards the end – old-timers like him and Sabu just didn't have the stamina for it, were better off looking stern and dignified in a corner someplace – but they were the only thing he missed from the times before Louis' leadership.

Outside was gray and cold as a tombstone. He got out his cigarettes and lit up, casting a hard eye at the tower's front gate. At daybreak he'd stepped out and seen a damp manila envelope laid at their threshold, with no writing or address. He'd picked it up and felt the slick rectangles of photographs inside, and tossed the envelope, unopened, into the hideout's furnace. He'd been in this business long enough not to take that sort of bait.

His lighter struck and the flame caught. He inhaled deep, eyes shut, and then stopped mid-breath. There was a distant sound elsewhere in the courtyard. Someone was crying, not loudly, but Miguel's senses were sharp as they'd been thirty years ago. He walked around to the back of the tower and then sighed out smoke. This was what he'd expected to see.

Free and Dolph's graves were little more than two hillocks of churned earth. No crosses – neither of them had been particularly religious – but they'd laid out a couple of smooth stones from the courtyard's walkway and scarred them to match their new owners, a crossed X and three vertical slashes. This was where they'd stay. Even if the impossible happened, and all of them lived through this, Miguel couldn't imagine digging them up again, after the worms had eaten their fill.

Agata was knelt in front of the mounds, weeping, his hands clutching his stomach like he was fighting a cramp. He'd done an admirable job of holding himself together during the burial, but all of the other lions knew this was coming. Most of them had been acquainted with violence their whole lives, but Agata was different, an upjumped delinquent from the suburbs who'd joined practically on a whim and been allowed to stay because of his pelt above all else. Dark-furred lions were good luck, the belief went. Dolph had vouched for him, which mattered a lot, and he was loyal and surprisingly strong, but he had a soft heart to match that baby face, and the survivors of the Shishigumi had privately worried if he'd be able to tough this crisis out. Pat and the Butchers' grisly exhibitions had shocked even the most hardened of them. A pampered cub like Agata must have been hanging on by a thread throughout all this.

Agata didn't notice as Miguel walked up behind him, which was another point of concern; if the Butchers had decided to pay another house call, he never would have seen them coming. Miguel cleared his throat and the young lion gasped and stiffened like he'd plugged his tail into a light socket. When he looked up and saw who'd come to visit, his hands instinctively went up to cover his nose, still raw from yesterday's punch. But Miguel just stood there, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"Paying your respects?" he said.

Agata's hands lowered. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about."

“I know I shouldn’t be out here alone. But I felt like I was gonna crack up in my room and figured I could at least do it out here. Where it might mean something.” He rested his hand on Free’s grave. “Do the others know?”

“Just me. Everyone else is still trying to rest.” Miguel looked at the misty, withered grounds, then back to Agata, still kneeling in the mud. “How’re you holding up, kid?”

For once, Agata didn’t bristle at the nickname. His eyes welled up again. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” His voice broke. “I don’t think I’m doing too good.”

“Just breathe,” said Miguel, as Agata stifled his sobs. “We’re all in a shitty place right now.”

“Yeah, but I’m the only one bawling about it.” He wiped his face with his jacket sleeve. “I’m sorry, Miguel. For calling Louis. I ruined everything, didn’t I?”

“No, you didn’t. It was a dumbass thing to do, but it might have worked out for the best in the long run. It was what got our asses out of that tower. If not for that phone call, we might never have found him at all.” He flicked away his cigarette; it had become too damp to smoke. “Feline luck. It comes and goes.”

Agata looked doubtful, which wasn’t surprising. He’d always been a skeptic about this sort of thing, one more mark of his outsider status. Miguel decided not to include the second detail, how Agata’s mane had shown them the way to Louis and Free, as if it had been the only one strong enough to resist the wicked influence of this rotten weather.

“Hey, Agata. Tell me straight. Do you want to leave? Don’t say no right away,” he added, because Agata was already shaking his head. “You’ve got family outside of this place, right? Unlike the rest of us. Go back to them. The other guys won’t blame you for it. Shit, we’ll go through what’s left of the gang’s cash and give you all that you need to buy a ticket out of this shithole town. You’re a good kid. You don’t deserve to go down with the rest of us.”

“I can’t,” said Agata. “I know you guys all think I’m not as strong as you, and maybe you’re right, but I could never leave. Especially not now.” He sniffled, regarded the graves again. “I first joined up because I wanted to act tough. Fell in with a bad crowd, my mom would have said. And then she’d probably beat the crap out of me.” Agata laughed a little at that, like it was a fond memory. “Kings of the beasts, my ass. We’re all just killers and thieves, aren’t we?”

“I wouldn’t deny it,” Miguel said.

“But you’re my friends,” said Agata quietly. “Dolph, and Ibuki and Free, and all the rest, even the ones who left after Louis joined. Maybe it’s naïve, but I couldn’t think of you any other way. And that’s why this hurts so much. Seeing this happen to you, over, and over, and over...” His breathing had started to hitch again. “I can’t abandon this place now. But I’m scared, Miguel. Not just for me. For all of us.”

Miguel reached down and lightly tapped him on the arm. Agata flinched, maybe expecting another punch, but when he turned he just saw Miguel offering his hand, his expression solemn. He took it and Miguel pulled him up, draped an arm over his shoulders. The kid was almost as muscular as Miguel himself, but underneath his suit he was shivering like an invalid kitten.

“This life is just a dream,” said Miguel. “It can be wonderful, horrible, senseless in the way it turns from one to the other, but all of it has to end eventually. Tomorrow or fifty years from now, it’ll blow away like fog.” As if to illustrate, he exhaled, the chilly air turning his breath to vapor. “But the brotherhood we have is stronger than that. It tethers us. In our own time, we’ll wake up into whatever comes next. And we’ll all see each other again.”

“You believe that?”

“I’m trying,” said Miguel. “Trying real hard.”

The city beyond the courtyard walls was bled into anonymity by mist. It curled among the weeds, pooled under the ornamental bridges. Miguel felt an itching on the back of his neck. He felt watched. But he kept his gaze on the graves, which offered neither judgement nor answers.

“Come on,” he said, and led Agata back to the tower. “Let’s get some sleep. I have the feeling shit’s going to get wild at nightfall.”

Agata nodded. But they hadn’t gone twenty paces before his pocket buzzed, making them both jump. Miguel released him and stepped away as Agata fished out his phone and checked the screen. He didn’t have to tell Miguel who was calling. The look on his face said enough.

Agata answered the call, brought the phone up to his ear.

“Louis?” he said. “Boss?”

* * *

It was a day like any other at the Hi-Collar café. The lunch rush was in full swing and most of the tables were booked, the animals there happily chatting away over sandwiches and coffee. There had been three more predation incidents in the last six hours. Somewhere outside of this little pocket of heaven, the city was blemished with bloodstains.

The cozy atmosphere stopped cold at Juno and Louis’ table. Both of them were unsmiling and silent, though in Louis’ case that’s because he had his mouth full. Normally he’d just order a small coffee and leave it half-finished, but this time he’d gotten two side salads and eaten them both, not quickly but with relentless mechanical determination, his fork in constant motion until the plates were cleared. His cane was leaned up against the wall beside his seat.

Juno drew her jacket around herself and shivered. When Louis had called her and asked for a meetup here, she hadn’t had any problem saying yes – the weekend had started, no need to play hooky – but there’d been a lack of affect in his voice that had given her an uneasy

feeling even before she'd come here, and seen that suit, that stick. Louis had called attention to none of it. He'd just greeted her, ordered his meal, and started to eat, leaving her imagination to chase its own tail. The milk tea she'd ordered sat untouched by her elbow.

Louis speared a final limp piece of lettuce, chewed, swallowed. He dabbed his face with a napkin and pushed the plates aside, folding his hands on the table. Like he was starting a job interview.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," he said. "I know I've put you through a lot of inconvenience lately."

Juno didn't waste time with niceties. "Something happened, didn't it? At the black market."

"Yes."

"Something terrible."

"Yes." He said it matter-of-factly.

"What did you-" she stopped as Louis winced, putting a hand to his forehead. "What's the matter?"

"Just a headache. It'll pass." He gingerly touched his antler and then lowered his hand again. "Anyway. As you said, there was an...incident that occurred last night. It's left me with a number of obligations to fulfill. Responsibilities that I've avoided for too long."

"You're involved with those lions again," she said dully.

"I am. For longer than I've claimed. I lied to you the last time we were here. I'm sorry about that."

"And Legosi? Is he mixed up in all this too?"

"Legosi is safe, and he'll continue to be if he stays put. But I'm not sure about everyone else." He cast a hard eye at all the happy diners around them. "The animals who were hunting him before have something planned. I don't know the details, but they appear to be quite excited about it. After we're finished speaking, please go back to Cherryton. It'll be safe there."

Juno's eye twitched.

"They're still talking about you," she said, laying her palms on the table. "Everyone from the club. They're worried sick."

"I understand. I'd reassure them all myself, if I could. But I have other duties to attend to." His antlers caught the light, gleaming as he tilted his head. "Juno, did I ever tell you where I grew up?"

"No," she said. And she didn't want him to. There was a grinding finality about this conversation that tied her stomach up in knots. But he went on talking anyway.

"I was livestock," he said, in that same plain, dead tone. "It's one of the black market's less savory business practices. Infant animals are rounded up or sold and then caged in special sites around the district. They seldom see daylight, and they're not taught to read or speak. They just wait for their number to be called, and off they go, into the dark. My father purchased me because he wanted an heir for his business empire. I was groomed into a high-class animal, but that life was bought and sold. I've always had one foot in the darkness. So to speak." He tapped his foot with a metallic *clink*. "I thought Legosi had freed me from that past. But it's useless. I can't run from myself. Part of the reason the situation in the black market has grown so out of control is because I couldn't accept that."

Juno didn't say anything. There was nothing she could possibly say against this casual deluge of secrets. But her claws slowly dragged across the table, gouging the wood.

"I owe the Shishigumi a great deal," Louis continued. "I'm going to repay that debt the best I can. But before then, I also wanted to settle something else. About the two of us."

"Which is?" she said.

"We touched on this subject last we met. The nature of our relationship." Now his composure cracked a bit, ears pinning low to his head. "It was insensitive of me to bring up your feelings while being so reticent with my own. To tell the truth, I've also...*dwelled* on that kiss you stole earlier this year, Juno. And I've found our conversations challenging. In a good way. Moreso than the ones with my fiancée, at least." He snorted, apparently oblivious to the furrows Juno was now digging into the tabletop. "I guess I've been in denial about this, as well. The plain fact of it is, when I'm around you, I-"

Juno got up and left with such violent quickness that her chair rocked back on one leg before clattering to the floor. Louis' speech stopped dead, jaw hanging open; by the time his brain registered what was happening she was already down the stairs. He fumbled out a wad of bills, slapped them on the table, got up, stepped on his bad leg, saw stars, and then cursed and grabbed his cane, shambling after her as fast as he could.

"Juno? Juno, stop! Where are you going?!"

The other diners turned their heads quizzically as he shoved open the door and looked down the street; Juno was half a block away, fists clenched, tail bristling. He followed her, shouting her name until she stopped and looked over her shoulder. Her one visible eye was a dark iron ball and its glare stopped him in his tracks, but he scowled and pressed forward until she came within arm's reach.

He caught his breath and then looked up at her. "What the hell was that about?"

"I'm not listening to this," she said. "Not another word."

"Sorry, was I *boring* you? Isn't this the exact conversation you've been trying to drag out of me for months?"

Juno turned around fully. "I don't love you."

Louis' expression at those four words became indescribable. It passed through disbelief, disappointment, fury, regret, and then just sagged on his skull like wet cardboard, looking desperately for some kind of answer in Juno's own face. He held onto his cane like a lifeline. Pedestrians were already giving them odd glances.

"I don't understand," he said. "You kept saying that you-"

"That I was in love with an herbivore! Not a *corpse!*" she shouted, loud enough to make the onlookers flinch. "Because that's what this is, right? Whatever the hell you're planning tonight, you don't think you're going to come back, so you're getting all your affairs in order. And I'm one more checkbox on your list. All of this is so you can go and die with a clear conscience!" She leaned in, teeth bared. "And you expected me to just listen to your carefully rehearsed confession and shed a single tear as you bravely limped away? You really think that little of me?!"

"Please calm down," Louis whispered, his eyes darting around the street. "Everyone's staring."

She just got louder. "Let them stare! I want them all to see what a goddamn idiot the heir to the Horns Conglomerate really is!"

"Juno, *shut up.*" Speaking through grit teeth now.

"I thought Legosi was bad, but you have to be the most self-unaware moron I've ever met." This wasn't just anger now; her eyes were misting over, voice cracking like thin ice. "Have you been listening to yourself, Louis? Debts, duties, responsibilities, obligations...why do you keep acting like this? What's wrong with just *wanting* something?! Or do you think that everything in your life has to be some kind of transaction, just because *you* were bought and-"

Louis hit her.

It was a clumsy slap, open-handed across Juno's snout, and he might as well have been striking a bag of sand. But Juno's head snapped to the side and Louis stepped away like he'd touched a live wire, cane falling to the ground, gripping his wrist as if he wanted to twist the offending hand off.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "That was unacceptable. I didn't...I never intended to..."

"Louis. Look."

He followed her gaze. The crowd around them had grown; several animals were muttering to each other. He saw a few surreptitiously recording on their phones. When he looked back to Juno she'd straightened, rubbing her cheek.

"If I'd done that to you then I'd probably be in cuffs already," she said.

"Not a chance. I wouldn't allow it."

“Of course. That’d make all the difference, wouldn’t it? It’s just like when I went out with Legosi. The unfairness. It makes me so angry I want to scream. But that’s not such a bad thing.” She met his eyes again, smiling like broken glass. “I hope I made you angry, too. Get mad, Louis. Because if you go into that place any other way, you’ll never come back out. And I won’t hear what you have to say unless you do.”

She turned on her heel and walked off, back straight, head held high. The crowd gave her the least resistance before parting; Louis couldn’t see what sort of look she’d given them, but he could hazard a guess judging by how quickly they cleared way. He was still there, leaning on his cane, when a border collie patrol officer elbowed his way through, helpfully tilting his cap as he approached Louis.

“Sir, are you all right? I was told there’d been some sort of altercation with a carnivore...”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Louis said, and the officer took a cautious step back – the deer’s face and posture were unthreatening, but his tone of voice was arctic. “That ‘carnivore’ is a friend. We were just out eating.”

* * *

Carnivores were passionate, canines especially so, and Juno was a fine example of the species – her classmates had grown to respect and fear her intensity, the way she pointed herself at what she wanted and went at it with ballistic force. She’d left Louis in that mob of rubbernecks with a slagheap of indignant rage glowing in her belly. But this weather drained the life from everything, dampened and doused that fire, so that by the time she made it onto the train home, all she had left was a fear that twisted in her like a knot of worms.

She sat down and folded her hands in her lap, giving the other passengers an uneasy glance. She hadn’t been able to hold back her fury at Louis’ idiotic behavior, but this was a bad, bad time for a carnivore to shout down an herbivore in public. That argument had doubtless been filmed, and for all she knew it was already going viral. As the train jerked in place and started down the tracks, she found herself compulsively pressing her hand against her cheek like an offended matron, trying to hide those distinctive tufts of fur.

Ever since she and the rest of the club had spent that long night in the classroom, they’d badgered her with questions about Louis and Legosi’s well-being – gently, with compassion, but they still wouldn’t let up, and their own distress became clearer every time they asked. Pina of all animals had laid off after that first bewildering chat with her on the school grounds, but Bill had practically begged her for any kind of update and she’d shown her teeth when she’d asked him to back off, so that he’d slunk away with his tail tucked low. Haru hadn’t asked her anything at all, and that was almost worse.

She hadn’t asked to become the arbiter between her classmates and her insane, suicidal friends. She’d never wanted to learn just how bad she was at this. And now, for all she knew, the last any of them would see of Louis would be some uploaded clip of her screaming at him as he stood stunned and hobbled on the sidewalk.

Juno’s breath had turned to hiccups. She knew what was coming, tried to use her breathing trick to cut it short – three seconds in, three seconds out – but when she exhaled it just came

out as sobbing instead. The animals on the seats beside her cautiously nudged away as she bent low, hand over her eyes, silently begging her stupid emotions to calm down and shut up before this got any worse.

“Excuse me. Are you all right?”

Juno looked up, wiped away her tears. Standing in front of her was a female coyote in a heavy overcoat, her head covered in a drab gray shawl. She vaguely remembered glimpsing this animal when boarding the train, on the opposite end of the car; she must have really been making a scene to get her attention like this. But the coyote’s look of genuine concern helped calm her down a little.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I just had an argument with a friend, that’s all.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. What happened?”

“He’s going to do something stupid and I think he wanted to tell me about it so that he’d feel better. I flew off the handle at him instead.” She sniffled. “It’s my fault. I can’t keep my feelings to myself.”

“Better that way,” said the coyote. “You can’t bottle them up forever.”

There was something odd about the way she talked. Juno realized what it was – that terse, start-and-stop intonation reminded her of how Legosi had spoken during her early days at the club. The speech of someone who wasn’t used to talking at all.

“Are you going somewhere?” the coyote asked.

“I’m just headed home,” said Juno. “What about you?”

“Meteor Square. The glass walkway.”

“Oh, I’ve been there once or twice. It’s beautiful.”

“It is,” she said gravely.

“Not much to see this time of year, though,” she said. “Especially with all this rain.”

“Yes. I think it’s going to start coming down hard very soon. But that’s where I’d like to be.”

The coyote shifted in place, stared at some vague point over Juno’s shoulder. Her coat swayed oddly on her – the way it laid against her body wasn’t quite right, like it was full of heavy padding – but before Juno could say anything the train started grinding to a halt.

“This is my stop,” she said. “Thanks for talking to me. It helped.”

“I’m glad.”

She stood aside so Juno could pass. The doors hissed open and Juno stepped onto the platform, but then she heard the coyote’s voice behind her:

“Excuse me. Where do you live?”

Juno turned. “I’m in a boarding school, actually. Cherryton.”

The coyote smiled, and that unease twisting in Juno’s gut sprang up all over again. The smile didn’t reach those weary eyes at all; it lay on her face like a centipede.

“I see,” said the coyote. “Then you should be fine.”

The doors closed and then all Juno could see was her own face, reflected in the smudged steel. Her reflection blurred into meaningless abstraction as the train picked up speed, bearing its passengers into the dark.

* * *

Now he was at the restaurant where he and Free had met not a week earlier, nursing a cup of black tea as the day wore on. The Shishigumi had preparations of their own to make; he had no choice but to cool his heels until they were ready. So now all he had left to distract himself were his thoughts, and the burning itch on his scalp, and the final task he had on his list. Of the three, he couldn’t decide what was worse.

He’d visited the deer clinic that his father frequented after leaving home that morning. The itch had to be psychosomatic, some kind of sympathy pain for the one in his leg, but he was still in danger of scratching himself a bald spot if it went on. It was the least of his problems by far, and would grow even lesser tonight, but that was small consolation.

Louis glared down at his phone. Legosi’s contact was displayed there.

He’d made a promise to Haru. The fact that this promise had been postponed due to extenuating circumstances was no excuse; if anything, it made things even worse. The one time in months he’d spoken to her, and he was letting her down again. He might not have another chance to make this call. So it had to be done. Odds were likely as not that the stupid dog wouldn’t even pick up.

He dialed. It picked up on the second ring.

“*Louis?*” said Legosi. “*Is that you?*”

Okay. Probably should have seen that coming. All he had to do now was say what he’d rehearsed. A little praise, a gentle guilt trip, enough to nudge Legosi into finally speaking to Haru and salvaging whatever bizarre relationship they still had. It was likely that Legosi would ask him if anything was wrong – Louis was quite sure he could disguise his voice well enough, but the wolf was endlessly concerned about everyone around him anyway. He’d just say that his father was being a pest, warn Legosi away from the black market one more time, and leave it at that. Try to end this on a good note, or at least a neutral one.

Louis said, “They killed Free.”

It was a broken whisper that escaped between his teeth. He stared ahead at the empty booth where Free had sat that night, lapping warm beer out of his glass as they’d spoken of better

times. It took a minute for Legosi to answer.

“What are you going to do?”

“Before he died, Free told me where the Butchers are hiding. I’m going there with the Shishigumi.” He peered into his teacup, saw himself reflected in the black slurry. “They’re planning something tonight. I don’t know what it is, but this has to end now.”

“What about Pat?” Legosi asked.

“He’s their leader. I’m sure he’ll be there, too.”

“When we met, he made himself sound like he was...apart from them. He doesn’t care about the Butchers enough to fight with them. He’ll be on his own.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, I can’t. But I have to be sure.” Legosi sighed; he sounded exhausted. *“I’ll find him.”*

“Legosi, please don’t,” he said. “No more of this self-sacrificing idiocy. Think about Haru.”

“If he gets away, this will all happen again. Another time, in another city. And no one else will ever find him. They don’t know what he looks like, or how he smells. But I know the smell of that pipe he was always smoking. I’ll track him with that. I’m the only one who can. And I think you know that, Louis. Isn’t that why you called?”

These stupid wolves. These insufferable carnivores. They nipped and gnawed and tore at the animal Louis thought he was and forced him to see what lay underneath. He leaned over the table; his eyes had begun to sting.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “You were always right. Ever since that day.”

“What?”

“At the restaurant. When you told me I was paralyzed by love. It’s those lions, Legosi. They’re criminals, and I did some horrible things when we were together, but there was so much I never would have learned about myself if I hadn’t joined them. I care about them. Even though it hurts. So much.” His tears spotted the tabletop. “I don’t want to be like this anymore. I want to move forward. No matter how painful it is.”

“That’s who you’ve always been,” Legosi said. *“It’s what I admired about you. I still do.”*

“That goes for you too, Legosi. You’re the most frustrating creature I’ve ever met, but I can’t imagine what my life would be like if I hadn’t gotten to know you better.” He bent his head as if in prayer. “Thank you for being my friend.”

The line went silent for so long that for a moment Louis wondered if the signal had dropped and he’d just said all that for nothing. But then Legosi spoke again, faintly, like he’d been stunned.

“I’m going to head out now,” he said. “Be safe. Stay dry.”

He let out a choked laugh; the wolf still had a talent for non-sequitur. “This isn’t goodbye, understand? We’ll see each other again.”

“I hope so. Let’s do our best.”

“Yes. For the ones we love.”

He ended the call and leaned into the corner of his booth, thinking of nothing. That was the final item on his list.

Around him were the soft clinks of cutlery, murmured conversation. He’d paid enough to guarantee himself this seat for the rest of the day if he wanted. He stared into the soft lights of the paper lanterns beyond, until his lids grew heavy and the restaurant’s colors blurred and ran.

His phone’s vibration jolted him awake all at once. He straightened, grimaced – dozing off like this had made his leg stiff as iron – and checked his phone. Agata’s text simply read: *We’re here.*

Louis grabbed his cane, tested his leg until it could bend again, and left the restaurant. Outside the clouds had darkened to a more menacing shade; the sun they concealed must have been close to kissing the horizon by now. A large black car idled on the road outside. As Louis approached, the doors opened, and Miguel and Jimma stepped out, the latter with a dark trenchcoat draped over his arm like a waiter’s dishcloth. They only gave his cane the slightest glance before nodding at him.

“Good to see you again,” said Miguel.

“Likewise,” said Louis. Jimma stepped behind him, shook out the trenchcoat, and reverently draped it across his shoulders.

The three of them entered the cigarette-smelling dark of the car, crowded with the remnants of the Shishigumi. Hino was behind the wheel; he started up the engine and drove away without a word. Louis sat flanked by Miguel and Sabu, Agata sitting across from him. The latter looked more strung-out than Louis had ever seen him, but he beamed at Louis’ arrival.

“Evening, boss,” said Agata. “We did everything you asked.”

“We’re ready as we’ll ever be,” Miguel added.

“You know the location, then?” said Louis.

“Yeah. Laundry off Dogtooth. We used to get our suits done there, once upon a time. Knowing those shitheads are using it as their HQ just gets me extra pissed.”

“But we have no idea what they’re up to,” said Jimma. “We’re basically blind. The market’s all shut up and we don’t have any allies left.”

“It’s irrelevant,” said Louis. “We have a destination and a goal. The rest will follow.” He looked up to Miguel. “Has Free been buried?”

“Yeah. Out back.”

“I’d like to pay my respects first. Then I’ll address everyone in the tower. We can head out after.”

“You got it.”

Dope leaned in. “No disrespect meant, boss. But I’ve gotta ask. Do you really want to do this?”

Louis nodded. “More than anything.”

The first drops of tonight’s rain spotted the car’s windshield. Hino turned on the wipers and drove on. The corpse of the black market, its entrance yawning like a broken jaw, grew ever closer. Dope offered Louis his cigarettes and Louis pushed them away with a polite shake of his head; instead he put his hand on Miguel’s knee, and the lion laid his own massive paw atop it. Louis closed his eyes and cherished the warmth, and felt the heat of his own rage bubbling up from within.

Spoon-Fed Sunshine

The apartment in which he'd been sequestered was a strange place. It had everything one would expect – a desk, some bookshelves, a kitchenette, a living room set with mid-size flatscreen television – but everything was out-of-the-box clean, the books were a mix of encyclopedias and old detective serials, and it all smelled like dust would smell if it had been freshly laundered. The overall impression was that this was a diorama of a home, rather than the real thing. The carpet and furniture were all upholstered in a soft rainwater shade, blue turning gray, not so different from his fur. He'd spent most of his time here lying on his side, arm splayed out, watching those colors bleed into one another. As though if he stayed like this long enough, he would disappear completely.

Legosi had spent much of his life learning how to keep still and stay silent. Early days in the sandbox by himself, later ones in his dorm room bed with the curtain drawn. Another inherited instinct from his grandfather, maybe. Before Louis and Haru had forced him to break out of his shell, he'd been content to remain inside and fortify it one layer at a time, neither thinking nor caring about what might happen if it might become fully impenetrable. In this place, he'd reverted back to those old habits, cocooning himself in dusty quietude as rain spattered against the windows and the city lights flared and faded again. He tried not to think of that outside world, but all that left him to do was pore over his memories of earlier silences and the days to which they'd led, the expanding spiral of violence that had always felt well-intentioned at the time but just ushered him into one disaster after another. These recollections always terminated in Pat's shadowed, drooling face, gleefully complimenting him on all the blood that he'd painted his knuckles with. There was no reason Legosi should have taken any of that maniac's words so seriously and yet they lodged in him like a splinter. It was as if Pat had reached out with those toxic claws and ripped through the animal Legosi had wanted to become easy as rice paper, revealing the predatory freak underneath.

And even then, he would rather ruminate on those words forever than think about what was awaiting him outside those doors – Haru, and the moment where he'd have to put an end to their sad, tentative relationship for good. He'd looked at hers and Juno's gentle texts and tossed his phone away, his face scrunched in pain. This hopeless love was a wound in both of them, festering more every day. It had to be cauterized.

He'd kept himself in stasis like this, stubborn resolve mortared with his self-loathing. But all of it had crumbled the instant Louis' name had popped up on his phone. His relationship with the deer was if anything even stranger and more contentious than Haru's, and probably no better for either of them, but Legosi couldn't lock him out no matter how he tried. It was like some essential component of the leg he'd eaten still remained in his body, leashing him to its former owner. Sit up. Speak. Good boy.

Louis rarely called with good news and this was no different. He'd told Legosi of the Butchers' final retaliation with the voice of someone standing on the edge of a bridge. The leash had tugged and Legosi's resolve had steeled itself once more. The Butchers and their deranged mastermind had now made enemies of them both. It was unthinkable for just one of them to fight back. But like Louis, Legosi now had preparations to make before he walked

into the black market's open maw. They were less organized and likely to be a good deal messier, but they still had to be done.

He went through the clothes that had been provided for him and pulled out a voluminous pullover sweater, faded red like gum tissue. This was the only piece of clothing that was still his, having been laundered by the prison and unceremoniously dropped back in his lap on the way out. He's worn this same thing when he'd fought off the blood-bone drug dealers a year ago. Smelling it, he thought he tasted iron in the back of his throat, memories of the those earlier fights. He pulled it on, then pulled open the bedroom window and leaned outside. The sky was turning the color of an anvil and something in the eddies of the wind made his fur tingle. The forecast had promised only light rain, but his senses told him a typhoon might be on the way.

The bed here was a full-size, much nicer than the one at the Hidden Condo; he'd felt guilty sleeping on it. He sat down on the mattress, got out his phone, went to his contacts. When he dialed he squeezed his eyes shut tight, so that all that remained of the world was the rush of blood in his ears, his breath, these voices.

"Legosi?" asked Haru. *"Is that you?"*

"Hi, Haru. Yes, it's me."

She didn't say anything else. His tone of voice communicated things well enough. They were practiced in this by months of careful silences, delicate movements, two creatures navigating bodies that were never meant to touch.

"Haru," he said. "Are you home right now? Alone?"

"Yes. No classes today and my family's not coming back 'til tomorrow."

"Can I come over?"

Another long pause, as she processed what had been left unsaid.

"Do you remember the address?" she asked.

"I think so."

"I'll send it to you," she said.

"Okay. I'm going to leave now. I'll be there soon."

"See you then. I love you, Legosi."

His free hand was resting on his leg, and at those words it clenched so tight it nearly tore his pants. "I love you, too. So much."

He hung up and stared ahead. The window was behind him and the dying sunlight printed his sharp-eared shadow on the far wall. It appeared to warp before his eyes, grow longer. He

thought he saw dim points of red light appear in that shape where the eyes would be, like holes drilled into another hungering realm entire.

Legosi got up and flung the apartment's front door open, heedless of the sensor that flashed red over the frame. His shadow followed.

* * *

The black market was a corpse now, laid out pale against the mortuary slab of the city's pavement. Even the main thoroughfare was totally abandoned, and there was evidence that the last few sales here had gone badly – smashed stools and countertops, gouts of blood painting the walls behind where the vendors should stand. After so many years of sustaining itself on the meat trade, and setting its routines by the movements and squabbles between the Four Families, Pat had abruptly reached out and destroyed both, cutting the arteries of the district. But like any carcass, there was new and terrible life breeding within. Its impoverished residents shut themselves away in their sorry homes, fearful of the mute hostility that had overtaken their streets, but their hunger grew by the minute. Soon, it would overtake their fear, and starvation would flood the streets like a pestilence.

Those who had phones still spoke, searching for news of outside. Wireless signals flitted through the stillborn air, voices reduced to electric snarl. Two of them were conversing now – one a papery rasp almost lost in the signal's crackle, the other harsh as a rust-choked chainsaw, its sneer audible in every word:

"It's a busy day today. But I'm always willing to make time for my new best friend. What's the latest, little lizard?"

"My contacts in the Damned 44th got in touch last night. They've added this city to their blacklist. They won't do business with us ever again."

"Ooh, that must hurt. Goodish portion of your revenue lost, am I right? Better get to hawking that venom."

"They've blacklisted you as well. You, specifically. One of their number ended up in police custody because of your scheming."

"They'll come back around. Was that all?"

"I take it that you intend to leave tonight."

"What if I do?"

"Because I know where you're headed. Where you'll be."

"I sure as shit hope so. Are you trying to say that our business ain't yet concluded? Got vengeance on your mind?"

"Our business was concluded after the Inarigumi. I swallowed my disgust, I ran interference for you as much as I could. Conscripting us into your grudge against the Shishigumi was a step too far. There will be consequences."

“Let me lay this out plain. I’d been looking forward to this evening for a long time, but that pissant wolf’s turned up the heat so much that I can’t stick around long enough to really let it soak in. So I’m already in a foul mood. You try to come after me, I’ll kill you. You come with ten, fifteen, twenty of your boys, I’ll kill them too. All the time you’ve spent squatting in this sad little kingdom must have given you an outsized view of yourself. You can’t take me. I shit bigger than you.”

“My kingdom. Yes. What have you done to it?”

“What?”

“Cruce seems to believe that you’re leaving us a parting gift. A coda to what you have planned for outside.”

“...heh heh. Tick, tick, boom.”

Raindrops staining the eaves, slithering down the tarps. Dripping into the secret places, where blocks of darker black dwelled. Pitter-pat.

“What are you?”

“You’re askin’ me that dumbass question now of all times?”

“I don’t mean your species. I thought I’d seen my share of depravity, but something like you...I can’t put a name to it. You’re diseased. What happened to make you like this?”

“I’m the same as you are. I’m hungry. And tonight, I’m going to stuff myself full while you and yours starve. You’ve been starving for so long that you’ve forgotten what you wanted to eat in the first place. But we both want the same thing. Death, fresh and warm between our teeth.”

“We’re nothing alike. Knowing that may be the only comfort I still have.”

“That comfort’s a sad delusion. You’re no different from me, that junkie, those lions, that dear decomposing vixen bitch and all the other morsels in those comfy towers outside. But better days are here. The truth will come in a great bright light. Watch the skies, little lizard. Can you see the meteor coming down?”

The line went dead, and in its wake was a chorus of growling stomachs.

* * *

The Dokugumi huddled in their shacks spotting the construction yard, the weather turning their cold blood to sludge. At the outset of all this, when the first bombing had just struck the market and Renne had still been alive, Agrippa had promised them that a moment of triumph was coming – the purgation of all the short-sighted ambition and witless violence that had destabilized their home. It hadn’t turned out that way. Now they marinated in their misery, but even at this low point, few of them resented Agrippa for ending up this way, and none did so openly. As he’d said to Free during their final, ill-fated meeting, the ancient Komodo *was*

the Dokugumi, and in these uncertain times, the edifice of him was the only solid thing they had left to cling to.

And he suffered with the rest of them, which helped. Agrippa carried himself regally but he was no more interested in creature comforts than the rest of the Dokugumi; he made his home in the foreman's cabin, a place not much bigger than the other lizards' shacks, and even less so if you took his own bulk into account. The cabin's furniture consisted solely of a cot (reinforced), desk, chair (also reinforced), and supply cabinet repurposed to hold Agrippa's scanty wardrobe, and the rest was taken up with maps and papers covered in his close, spiky handwriting, outlining the movements of the Four Families' activities from day to day. As Gosha had said to Legosi, reptiles were deeply attached to their habitats, and Agrippa was as bound to the black market as sea creatures were to the water. There was nothing for him outside of this district.

Zeke had been standing guard outside of the cabin all morning – a mostly pointless endeavor, because Agrippa had created a discreet back exit decades ago. It was another reptilian compulsion, the need to always keep an escape route handy, the architectural equivalent of a detachable tail. Zeke had kept guard with statuesque poise, but just past noon there was a sharp *crack* from behind the door that made him flinch. Several minutes after that, Agrippa asked him to come in.

He stepped inside cautiously, latching the door behind him. Agrippa was on his cot, overcoat off; he wore a black cable-knit sweater underneath that shifted and slid on his scales like oil. His gnarled hands were knotted arthritically in his lap.

"Have a seat, Zeke," he said. "Pull down that mask while you're at it."

Zeke complied, taking the chair. When he sat down he noticed the dent in the wall, and the shattered phone lying beneath it.

"What did he say?" Zeke asked.

"What I expected. He confirmed everything and laughed in our faces." He shook his head. "Wretched little monster. If only I'd known."

Zeke held his tongue. Agrippa's alliance with the Butchers had been one of the only times in the Dokugumi's history where several of the rank-and-file gangsters, Zeke included, had argued with his decision. Agrippa had won out in the end, and the losers' silence only became more crushing as Pat's stranglehold had tightened.

"So the market's been rigged to blow," said Zeke. "What now? Do we find the bombs? Can you disarm them?"

"My army days are long behind me, and they didn't involve much in the way of demolitions. The only animals in the city who might be able to deal with them are the Beastar's underlings or the police. And I have little doubt that Civic Harmony's uncovered our culpability in all this. We can't ask them for help without destroying ourselves."

"But if the bombs go off..."

“Ruined either way.” Agrippa’s stare was hollow. “It’s funny, really. Of all the Families, the only one who might have seen us through this was Renne.”

Zeke, unlike Sabu, wasn’t an elective mute. He simply didn’t talk unless he had something to say, and there was little to be said as long as Agrippa was around. He’d never seen the boss so vulnerable, and his words, already neglected, dried up.

Agrippa said, “How long have you been with us, Zeke?”

“Thirteen years and two months,” he said promptly.

“God, time does get away from you. You were barely to my knee when you tried to pick my pocket. I’m still not sure how you even intended to reach it.”

“Thought I’d slash it open first. You were so layered up I didn’t think you’d feel it.”

“Quite the little entrepreneur, weren’t you.”

“I was just trying to survive,” said Zeke.

Agrippa nodded, once. “Yes. That’s been the Dokugumi’s driving principal. Preservation. Survival at all costs.”

He finally looked at Zeke. His expression was desolate.

“It would have all been yours,” he said. “In case there was any doubt. I’d despaired of ever finding a decent successor, but you never disappointed me. And I’ve gotten so old.” He ran a claw across the back of his other hand, as if mapping the geography of his scales. “I’d started to wonder if you would just take this position by force. Especially in these recent weeks.”

“Killing you would have caused more chaos in the black market. We would have been playing right into Pat’s hands.” Zeke’s gaze flicked down to the floor. “And you’ve always treated me well.”

“I see your reasoning. But I wouldn’t have blamed you. It’s clear that I’ve...lessened myself, in your eyes. In everyone’s.”

“We all went along with it, in the end. It’s something we have to live with.” Zeke’s fang flashed as he raised his head again. “But to do that, we still have to live. Isn’t that right, sir?”

Agrippa snorted. Then he rose from the cot, went to the desk and pulled open a drawer. He extracted a small drawstring pouch and took a sniff, made a face.

“Putrid stuff,” he said. “But this is as close as we’re going to get.”

“You’re still after revenge? Will he even come here?”

“I’d bet my life on it.”

“Your life, huh. What about survival?”

“Living means little if you can’t live with yourself.” He crossed the room again and shrugged on his coat. “I won’t meekly slink away into the night. We’re going to hold them all accountable. Everyone who’s brought us to this point. And when it’s done, then I can be held to account as well.” He pocketed the pouch and extended a hand to Zeke. “Will you stand with me? For one more long night?”

Zeke took his hand and Agrippa pulled him up. There was no warmth between them – their scaled skins and cold blood left them insensate as stones to one another’s touch. But they emerged from the cabin side by side, and the rest of the Dokugumi, beaten and bedraggled though they were, felt their mouths itch with dripping venom.

* * *

Legosi hadn’t brought an umbrella, and by the time he arrived at Haru’s neighborhood, rain was already speckling his shoulders. He felt numerous eyes on him through the windows of these tiny houses – it reminded him of his last couple of treks into the black market, though these gazes had none of the hostility of the Butchers’. These herbivores were afraid of him. Understandably so.

It had been also been raining the night he’d come here last, when he’d eaten dinner with Haru’s family and made the possibly over-hasty decision to confess his crush to her father. These houses all looked alike, but his memories of that time were so sharp that he still recognized her home from the scarring in the brickwork, an inconspicuous dent in the front gate. He had to hunch over just to get into the front entrance, and when he knocked, his knuckles rapped on the door three-quarters of the way up.

It swung open at once. Haru looked up at him, the white puff of her face a handful of melted snow.

“Hey, you,” she said.

“Hi,” said Legosi. His tail dangled limply between his legs.

He stepped in and the aroma hit him at once. His stomach was growling before he even took his shoes off, and Haru looked back at him with a mix of exasperation and amusement.

“Have you eaten anything today?” she asked.

“I had a bun.” His fingers paused mid-unlacing. “A roll, I mean. Bread.”

“That’s it? Plain bread?” She sighed. “You’re such a martyr. Come on.”

Haru’s stove was tiny even by the standards of her home, and right now it was occupied by a pot of bubbling soup, sunshine-yellow, with chunks of unidentifiable vegetable matter that bobbed up and down in its surface like breaching fish. It gave off a deep, earthy smell that made Legosi’s nostrils tingle. He hurriedly wiped his mouth in case he’d started drooling.

“Carrot stew?” he asked. Haru stared at him until he obediently pulled up a chair and sat, and then she went to the stove.

“Squash, actually,” she said. “But carrots are involved. Plus tomatoes, lentils, a crapload of spices, so on and so forth. It’s a family recipe.” She gave it a stir, tasted, shrugged. “Figured my folks would want dinner when they came back.”

“It smells delicious.”

“Probably better than it’ll taste. It hasn’t finished simmering yet. But I doubt you’ll mind, Mr. Plain Bread.” She ladled some into a bowl. “You wanted to talk.”

“Yes.”

“Then we can talk while this stuff cools. Do you want tea, or anything?”

“Just water, please.”

He sat with his arms and knees pulled close to his body, like he wanted to disappear into himself. He tensed even further as her delicate little hands set his bowl, spoon and drink in front of him, but she said nothing about it. She went to the opposite end of the table and sat down. A clock ticked somewhere. To Legosi’s right, the array of family photographs stared out like a jury.

“Juno told me about what happened to you in the black market,” she said. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

He pointed at her empty place setting. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“I can wait for the stuff to actually finish cooking,” she said. “But you have to go somewhere. Don’t you?”

Her oildrop eyes reflected Legosi’s guilty face. He looked down at his spoon and saw the same face in its polished surface. He couldn’t get away from it. So he took a breath, and told her everything.

By the time he’d finished, the steam coming off his stew wasn’t quite so volcanic. Haru’s expression hadn’t changed as he’s talked about his discovery of the bombs, his chat with Sunaga, the meeting with Pat, his sequestration and Louis’ phone call. There was just a slight sagging of her ears, and when he finished, she gestured to his bowl.

“You should eat,” she said. “It tastes like crap when it gets cold.”

He obliged. Even though his belly had been tense as a clenched fist moments before, the moment that first mouthful hit his tongue, the spoon practically blurred. Haru was wrong; it did taste as good as it smelled. It wasn’t three minutes before he was licking the last dregs of broth out of the bowl, its spiciness dancing on his tongue like oil on a skillet. Haru was smiling bemusedly now, hand to her chin.

“You’re gonna get wicked heartburn,” she said.

“Thank you for the meal.” He set his bowl down and stiffened up. Haru’s face had gone solemn again.

“Legosi. Are you doing this just because Louis asked you to?”

“No. I’m doing- excuse me.” He wiped his mouth, gulped water, and continued. “I’m doing it for me. It’s true that Louis is a part of it, but I have things I need to finish in there, too. Pat’s avoided the law for a long time. I’m the only one who can track him down.”

“He sounds like really bad news. Worse than Riz by a longshot.”

“He is. But only because he doesn’t fight fair. I know his tricks now.”

“Like what?”

He took too long to answer. “That’s not important. What matters is I know them. If I find him, I can beat him.”

She was wearing a gray cowl-necked sweater, not much different from the one she’d worn the night she and Legosi had visited the black market; in fact, the color was a close match for Legosi’s fur shade. She tugged on its neck like it was choking her, looking off to the bubbling pot.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” she said.

“Sure.”

“If you hadn’t eaten Louis’ leg, do you think you could have beaten Riz?”

It came out casually as a question about the weather, and it poleaxed him for a moment.

“Would it...I don’t...I’m not sure. I don’t think so. Why do you ask?”

“I’m just wondering whether it’d help if you ate mine.”

And that was a follow-up blow that nearly knocked him out of his seat. He actually rocked back, the tiny chair groaning dangerously as his weight shifted. Haru showed no reaction as he lunged forward again, slapping his palms on the table.

“That’s not funny,” he growled.

“Not sure how much good it’d even do,” she continued. “Louis is a skinny guy but I’m barely even a mouthful compared to him. Not to mention dealing with the first-aid afterward, and I dunno if I could tell a convincing story to the police...”

“Haru, stop it!”

His muzzle had started to wrinkle, but then all the anger dropped out of him at once. Haru’s face and voice were as composed as ever, but there were silvery tear-streaks in her fur.

“You drive me crazy,” she said. “Lately I’ve gone around telling everyone that I’m living for myself, no regrets, no fear for the future. Thinking that it meant I was some big tough grown-up instead of a weak little rabbit. Now I see you doing the same thing and it makes me want to scream.” She forced another smile. “I can’t get comfortable around you, you dumb wolf.”

“I’m sorry. But I-”

“You have to do this. I get it. Just wish there was something I could do besides give you dinner and wait for you to come back.”

Legosi stayed quiet after that, long enough for the atmosphere in the kitchen to get even tenser.

“Haru,” he said. “There’s something else we have to talk about.”

“Oh, boy. This sounds serious.”

“It is.”

He pushed his bowl away and folded his hands on the table. He studied every corkscrew of fur, every glinting claw. It took a long time, but with a mighty effort, he was able to meet Haru’s eye again.

He said, “We need to break up.”

The stew Legosi had eaten roiled inside his gut. The clock ticked. Haru had gone very still. Like she’d been replaced with a prop of herself.

“Before we met, I didn’t understand who I was,” he said. “I didn’t think it was important. All that mattered was that I was never going to belong anywhere. I’d come to accept that. Then I met you, and all I could think about was how you might see me. And that forced me to finally look at myself, too. I didn’t like most of what I saw. Just another carnivore who can’t fight his appetite. But you kept finding things about me to love. It made me think that, no matter what might happen in the rest of this society, I’d have a place at your side. It helped, to believe that. More than you could ever know.”

He swallowed; Haru had barely blinked.

“But I don’t think I can change,” he went on. “If I stay beside you, I’m going to bring you nothing but grief. Just like I’m doing now. My predation offense is never going away. And these things I keep doing, getting into fights, putting my life on the line...I can’t resist them. I’m hungry for this feeling. It’s horrible, but ever since that first day, when I was punching Bill on that stage, I felt like I was finally ‘me.’ I keep coming back to it, like I’m chasing that moment. In the end, I’m just the same ugly carnivore who grabbed you in front of that fountain. I’ve been holding on to you ever since. And I have to let go.”

The silence that followed felt epochal. Cities could have risen and fallen in it. The world around this house might have withered into desert and eroded to nothing. Legosi waited for the least sign acknowledgement from Haru, the most minute twitch of her head, so that he could take his cue to get up and leave and not look back.

Instead she hopped onto her chair and stepped onto the table.

“Haru?” Legosi asked. She advanced on him. “Haru, what are you-”

She kicked the bowl aside and he flinched as it clattered into the corner of the room. She was a few inches taller than him like this and he was transfixed by the sight of her – the same as she'd been in his room the last night they'd spent together, the overhead lights haloed between her ears.

"No," she said.

"What?"

"I said *no*."

She bent over and grabbed one of his wrists. Slender though it was, she still needed two hands to lift it up. She pressed her sweater sleeve against it and once again Legosi noticed how closely the shades matched.

"You see this?" she asked. "I bought this thing because it reminded me of you. I keep watching TV shows with canines in them, and I notice every one I pass on the street. Even when we're apart, it's like I turn around and you're always there. No matter how much I try to convince myself I've grown out of this stupid relationship, I haven't changed either. I can't stop thinking about you, Legosi." Her voice started to quaver. "After hearing all that, do you really think I could just let you go?"

"But it's for the best," he said. "I already put you in danger again because of this. I don't want you to get hurt!"

"So what? You could crush me with one hand if you wanted, and I never gave a damn about that either!" She tossed his hand down. "Because I love you, you idiot. It doesn't matter that you have that mark on your record, or that you get into fights all the time, or that you're the most clueless, awkward *weirdo* that ever lived. I don't care about danger. All I care about is *you*!"

At that last word, she stomped the table hard enough to rattle the cutlery. Legosi's jaw hung open, useless. He'd gotten on Haru's bad side before, but right now she was a tiny dervish that he didn't dare stir up any further. She stood there, panting, and then appeared to come to a realization. She leaned in close enough for her eyes to fill with Legosi's reflection.

"I knew from the start that an herbivore-carnivore romance was going to be hard," she said. "But not like this. You keep running from me every time I try to get close. One of us has to be the predator here, Legosi." She took his muzzle in her hands. "I'm not going to just stand still and let you run anymore. I'll be the one who hunts you down. No matter where you go, how fast you are, I will always, always catch you. You're never getting rid of me."

"And then what?" he asked weakly. Her palms were hot as brands against his snout. "What if I do come back?"

"Then we stay together, and to hell with what anyone else thinks," Haru said. "I want you to be happy, too. And I want... I hope that I can take the place of whatever this thing is. That hunger you talked about, that makes you put your life on the line over and over. I'm not

afraid of it. I can love that part of you too, if that's what it takes." Her eyes filmed over with wet. "But if it keeps growing like this, then I think it's going to kill you."

Legosi stared dumbly as she sat down at the edge of the table, legs dangling over his lap, and dabbed her eyes with his napkin. In the kitchen's soft light her fur seemed to glow, coruscate, like she was holding a sun all her own within. He wanted to hold her but he was afraid it might burn. Herbivores always left him weak.

She set his napkin aside. "I guess you have to go soon."

"Yes. It's getting late."

"All right. There's just one more thing." Those fine, delicate hands knotted together nervously. "Will you kiss me? Properly, this time. Not just a peck on the cheek before you run out the door."

Some traitorous part of his mind started to raise an objection, but he smashed it flat before it could utter a word. "Okay. But fair warning, I don't have a lot of experience...I mean, there was one time, but that wasn't really a *kiss* kiss." Haru raised an eyebrow as he started to fidget. "Will our size be a problem? My face is really *long*..."

She caressed the side of his muzzle and he froze up. He was falling forward into her gaze. Not sure if he would ever land.

"Just close your eyes and lean in," she said. "The rest will work itself out."

He obeyed. The kitchen disappeared as he shut his lids and bent forward, farther than he'd expected, so that for a moment he was worried that he'd somehow missed Haru entirely. And then, he tasted her.

He was too big to properly embrace. It was all she could do to lay one hand against his head and the other beneath his neck, tangling her fingers in the undergrowth of his fur. Her small mouth mashed against his teeth and he was overtaken by that taste, the terrycloth rasp of her fur and the salt and heat of the body beneath, melting with the earthiness of the stew she'd fed him; he gently enclosed her with his massive hands and felt her hummingbird heartbeat as she angled her head against his own, her tongue tracing the canyon of his mouth, the pressure of her kiss receding and returning like the tides. He couldn't remember when he'd last taken a breath. In that moment, he felt like he would never have to breathe again.

But the moment passed, and she let him go, pulled away. She was crying again, and when Legosi opened his eyes, he felt wetness carve thin rivulets down his own cheeks as well. Maybe a leak from the ceiling, after all this rain.

"Goodnight," he said.

"Goodnight," said Haru.

He got up, a little shakily, and left. The kitchen was visible from the house's front door, and as he grasped the knob he looked back one last time and saw her still there, sitting on her

table, one finger pressed to her lips like she was asking him to keep a secret. He remembered this image. Then he stepped out, into the growing dark.

* * *

The photo's lighting was impeccable. Louis was centered in frame, his antlers an abstract scrawl over his head, the flash a pinprick corona in his shellshocked eyes. The front of his jacket was spattered red; at his feet, the vague lump of the fallen Free could be seen. His mouth was slightly open like he'd been trapped in the middle of a question that would forever be unasked. Then the epilogue – skipping over his righteous fury and into the frail uncertainty that followed, the regal prince realizing that he was so much useless meat. Saliva dripped onto the photo's glossy surface and was quickly wiped away.

"Damn fine work," said Pat. "This is gonna keep me warm for the whole trip."

"Glad you approve," said Karlov.

"And you were ready to toss away your camera when we first met. What a waste that would've been, eh?"

They were in Pat's workshop, sandwiched between the throbbing flesh of the black market's surface and the poisoned flow of its sewage beneath. The prosthetics would sit here like relics until the ceiling caved in; Pat had no further use for them. Much of his luggage for this trip had been prepared in advance, and all he'd taken with him now was clinking beneath his coat. That arsenal could be glimpsed as he tucked the photos into their envelope and slipped it into an inner pocket.

Karlov was at the entrance, hands folded like usual. For all the years they'd known each other, he still seemed loathe to actually cross that threshold. His muzzle clip was firmly in place. Pat's had been abandoned – the burnflesh-colored protuberance of his muzzle was plain to see, freshly slick with drool from the stimulation of Karlov's pictures. He grabbed an oil-stiffened rag from his workbench and mopped off his mouth, then slid off the stool.

"The rest of the explosives are prepared," said Karlov. "They should go off shortly after the conclusion of our operation in the city."

"They'd better. I rigged up those timers myself." He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Probably a good thing I didn't use incendiaries this time. My hip's screaming. It's gonna pour."

"Will that cause a problem in the city? There might be fewer pedestrians..."

"Nah, the weather forecast was kind. Dumbasses couldn't even get that part right." He grinned and spread his hands, claws glinting. "It was a little rocky getting here, but everything turned out fine and well."

"I see," said Karlov. "So this is goodbye."

His face remained carefully stony as Pat tilted his head and crept closer, leering. As with Legosi, Pat barely came up past Karlov's chest, but the Doberman quailed a little as he reached up with one claw and stroked his muzzle clip, gentle enough to leave the finest of scratches.

"That a trace of mourning I see in your mug?" Pat said.

Karlov perceptibly relaxed as Pat's hand lowered. "We always knew it would end like this. And like you said at the start, all my time was borrowed anyway. But we can't help our natures."

"Too true. The block makes everyone shake a little. But it's so nice, to finally have a place you can rest your head." He tugged his hood lower, burying more of his mutilated snout in shadow. "Me, I've gotta keep going. Ain't sated yet. Not by far."

"I imagine the police will come in droves by tomorrow at the latest. What remains of the Butchers will welcome them with open arms."

"And open mouths, I bet." Pat's jagged grin gleamed. "I've had some fun playmates, Karlov, but for what it's worth, you were the best by far. Thanks for the good times."

Karlov nodded. "Thank you, as well. For saving me. For showing me the truth of things."

"Everyone'll get the message soon enough. You should leave that stuffy office for a change, before it all starts. Get yourself a taste." He almost promenaded into the corridor, his bootheels squealing on the grating. "You know what that nutty bastard Melon said, right before those fuckup lions did him in? A better piece of wisdom I've never heard: die with your mouth full!"

He waved at Karlov and marched off into the darkness. Karlov's angular shadow bled into the gloom, and then disappeared.

Pat took the elevator up and rocked back and forth on his feet as it ascended, whistling tunelessly through his slobber. These were the nights he treasured most, when the work of countless nights before all converged; for these brief, brilliant moments, all the years dropped away from him. He felt like he might walk on air, be lifted up to join the stars.

The hallways in the Butchers' above-ground headquarters were empty. They would become fuller soon, Karlov's skeleton crew stripping the wires of this beautiful operation before the police could march in, but for now Pat walked alone, the fluorescents ahead a droning counterpart to his whistle. He entered the call center that had once been a nicotine-yellowed laundromat and walked among the drab gray tables, scraping their dull surfaces with his claws; he picked up a phone and pressed the receiver to his hood, drinking in its dead signal. Every sensation fed him on nights like these. Everything was savored.

The black market's decrepitude greeted him as he stepped outside; raindrops drummed secret rhythms on his shoulders. As he walked its alleys, the neon lights flicked on again, a parody of life, like a spasming limb. He gazed up at that color with childlike wonder, and the signs briefly illuminated the mass of churned meat lurking in the depths of his hood. Then he tilted

his head, nostrils flaring; there was the faint scent and heartbeat of someone just on the other side of an apartment door. He lunged at it and gashed the wood with his claws and there was a shriek and a thump as the unseen animal fell back, and Pat set off again, cackling.

For months and years he'd lurked in the damp and hidden places of this district like a fungus, vicariously pleasing himself through the chop and thud of cleavers through dismembered bone. But the black market, like its residents, were the same all over, its asphalt flesh soft and moldable as clay, and once he'd strapped on his claws again he'd reshaped it into a place all his own. Every street opened wide for him. The gutters and eaves were cheering his name.

Pat stopped at a crossroads, a paved circle where the streets dipped and curled like ribbons. The neon lights painted toxic patterns on his spit-soaked snout. He reached into his coat and removed his phone, composed a brief message, then held it high and hit Send. The signal went out, and in the city outside these walls, bedraggled and anonymous animals – the resentful, the wrathful, the weak and the wounded – stirred into life.

* * *

Legosi's lean silhouette crossed into the black market like a gunslinger at high noon. But there were no witnesses, and no daylight. The anvil-colored sky was darkening to black, and save for the raindrops flitting through the shop signs' neon glow, the street was utterly still. Even the sounds of traffic from outside ceased when he crossed out. It was like he'd entered another world.

He tilted his head up and sniffed.

The smells of meat and blood that had once permeated these streets had been reduced to a mélange of smells at once sterile and nauseatingly organic – wet ash, worm-eaten fabric, leaves rotted to tannin. Within this fog of decay he could pick up the comings and goings of the market's final customers, their lingering scents intersecting frantically; it had been all-you-can-grab before the shops had finally closed, the last few scraps being snatched and hoarded before everyone had shut themselves away. He sniffed again and shuddered; there was that greasy, slippery scent, the smell of the explosives he'd found the last time he had come here. It was stronger now, and coming from multiple directions. Legosi wondered if this was what Louis had meant when he'd said that the Butchers had something planned for tonight. This whole area might have been rigged to blow.

But there was nothing he could do about it now. He had to focus on the task at hand. Legosi sniffed one final time, deeper, and found it – that gasoline reek, clawing its way down his throat much like its owner. The aroma of Pat's pipesmoke lodged in his mind and snapped taut like a fishing-line, so that he could trace it through these immiserated pathways.

He barely had to open his eyes; his nose was presenting the world in its own colors now, every tumbled stool or stray pothole making itself known to him by its own wafting scent. He walked down the thoroughfare into the market's depths, stopped, looked to his left. The pipesmoke's scent led into the side alleys, where the lights were dimmer, the walkways narrower.

"Hey. Hey, Legosi. Can you hear me?"

He didn't smell the speaker. Aside from him, there was nothing else out here living. But the voice, a doleful monotone so much like his own, was so close that he could almost feel its breath. He turned to the opposite alley. At its far end, where the lights couldn't reach, there was a tall shadow, sharp-eared, sharp-clawed. He saw the tufts of fur on its cheeks, the bagginess of its photo-negative sweater. Its eyes were bloodred pits.

He turned away, tracking the scent. The voice followed.

"We haven't spoken since that night, have we? It was so much like this one. Wet and cold. I remember how the mist curled around the fountain. How you held her when you pounced on her from behind. It was the first time you'd ever touched an herbivore like that. You felt her heartbeat between your hands and it reminded you of the flapping of an insect's wings. Something so fragile."

The scent grounded him. The market's architecture mutated around his step, it towered impossibly high and ran like tallow; the neon bled through his eyelids and faded again as he passed through these striated bands of poisonous light. And while he was grounded, the voice rose up, like it had become untethered. If he turned his head he might have seen that shadow, its ears cresting over the buildings, growing ever larger.

"Of course I'm growing. You've fed me all this time."

Liar. Liar.

"It's the truth. You haven't changed, Legosi. You thought you could starve me but there's more than one way to eat. Their meat in your belly, their blood on your fists, her heart in your hands. It's all the same to me. I'll swallow it all. I won't leave anything behind for you. No matter how hard you try, you'll never be free of me."

He was passing into the most deprecated parts of the city, where the shop signs were splintered clapboard and all the lamps were long-smashed. He had tried. He'd tried so hard.

"No. You didn't. All you ever cared about was yourself. Again and again, the ones who still cared for you begged you to keep yourself safe. But you wouldn't listen. You hurt them, because you like to hurt others. It's only at times like this, in places like these, when you're free to act like the monster you really are."

The pipesmoke stink grew stronger. Legosi's nostrils flared; there were other scents beneath it now, like a spike pit under dry moss. He didn't recognize them and yet he did. His fists clenched so tight that his claws punctured his palms, drawing blood, adding their salty iron smell to the market's bouquet.

Louis' enraged shouting over the phone. His grandfather's concern, quickly concealed. Yafya's exhausted exasperation. Juno messaging him with his schoolmates' worry. Haru, sitting at the table alone, the taste of the food he'd eaten still fresh on her lips. All of them growing further away with every step.

He approached a high chain-link gate covered with plastic tarping. Behind it, the dark skeleton of a half-finished high-rise scraped the sky. Legosi undid the gate's latch and

paused. The shadow behind him had grown so colossal that its words threatened to crack his bones like glass.

“I’ll eat your life until there’s nothing left of it. And why not? You never deserved it anyway. Remember their faces, Legosi. Everything they’ve done for you. The secrets they’ve shared, the sacrifices they’ve made, their kindness and patience and trust...they might as well have taken all of it and dropped it down a hole. That’s what you are.”

He pushed open the gate.

“You’re a waste of love, Legosi.”

He didn’t turn back, not even when someone slammed the gate shut behind him and latched it again. The construction yard here was crowded with shapes, dozens of them, scrawny and thick-tailed. Many of them had pistols, even a few automatic weapons. The largest among them stood like an obelisk in the center of the yard and Legosi advanced on it until the others raised their guns, and then he stopped. The giant Komodo dragon took a drag from the pipe between his teeth, and the bowl’s flame flared and printed itself on his glasses. He expelled a cloud of that evil, gasoline-smelling smoke.

“Looks like we got the blend right after all,” he said. “Agrippa, head of the Dokugumi. It’s a pleasure.”

It was drizzling harder now, and the drops tapped impatiently on the scattered shacks’ tin-and-tarpaper roofs. Legosi stared hard at Agrippa and said nothing.

“I had a feeling you’d come sniffing ‘round these parts again, after the awful night your little deer friend had. This may well be our only chance to meet. I wanted to thank you properly for raising so much hell in my territory.” Agrippa took the pipe out of his mouth, and his thin voice gained a caustic edge. “Your idiotic assault against the lions was the pebble that started this avalanche. All the chaos that followed, all those deaths, can be laid at *your* feet. And yet it seems like other animals keep hiding you from the consequences. It doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

The unarmed members of the Dokugumi clustered around Agrippa, and those with firearms sighted down on Legosi, but he didn’t even blink. Agrippa’s smirk withered for a moment against his muteness, but asserted itself again.

“Not much of a talker, eh?” he said. “That’s quite a stare you have. I can see the reptile in your eyes.”

Legosi said, “I’m more of a reptile than you’ll ever be.”

That wiped the smile off Agrippa’s face completely.

“Come again?” he said, dangerously soft. Legosi didn’t answer. “What the *fuck* did you just say to me?!”

One of the lizards, dressed in nothing but a ragged scarf and combat pants that showed off his muscled torso, broke off from the throng and swaggered toward Legosi. He spit a stream of venom like tobacco juice and leaned up to the wolf, slit eyes burning.

“The boss asked you a question,” he hissed. “Better speak up if you don’t-”

Legosi barely moved. The closest lizards heard a *thud* and saw their comrade’s body jerk, and his words dissolved into a wet gurgling sound. Without taking his eyes off Agrippa, Legosi backhanded him and sent him flying away; he hit the ground rolling and then stayed there, knees pulled up fetal, clutching his belly.

“You’re working for Pat,” he said to Agrippa. “Aren’t you.”

Agrippa was the quiet one this time; his eyes kept flicking between Legosi and his incapacitated underling.

“I remember something my grandpa told me,” said Legosi. “Reptiles are tied to their homes. If they find a place they’re comfortable with, then they’ll fight for it with everything they have. Louis told me to walk away from all this when it started getting really bad, but I didn’t want to leave the life I’d built for myself. I think that must have been the reptile in me.” He rubbed the side of his mouth, like he’d suffered a sudden toothache. “The black market is your home, isn’t it? But Pat’s destroyed it. I could feel that just by walking here. And you helped him do it. If we’re defined by our natures, our instincts, then where did yours come from? Because that’s not like any reptile I’ve ever heard of. I still have no idea what kind of animal Pat is, but you’re no different from him.”

Agrippa’s hand closed over the pipe and crushed it to splinters. His lips had peeled back, frothed with saliva-streaked venom. All the lizards around him had cautiously backed away save one, who’d pulled down his mask, his own face a mix of fury and awe.

Agrippa managed to say, “How many of you have guns?”

The answer came in a flurry of clicking hammers. There wouldn’t be any dodging this; Legosi would be reduced to ground meat in seconds if they all opened fire.

“Toss them aside,” said Agrippa. “All of them. All of you.” The lizards looked at each other in confusion. “*Do it!*”

They dropped their guns, the clatter of metal echoing through the yard. Agrippa’s chest heaved within his coat as if he too was about to detonate. Legosi still didn’t flinch; something far worse still loomed at the gateway to his back.

“This arrogant mutant just insulted all our pride as reptiles,” Agrippa said. The words slurring a bit as if his venom-saturated mouth had melted them. “Would we just shoot him in the head and be done with it? Or would we take the time to show him just how mistaken he truly is? Well?!”

The Dokugumi muttered in agreement. Several of them fell into battle-ready poses. But Legosi merely flexed his shoulders and cracked his neck, and Agrippa scoffed despite

himself.

“Look at you. Do you really believe you have a chance?”

“I’ve been here before,” said Legosi. “I can’t resist it. The chance to bare my fangs for a righteous cause. But this will be the last time.”

“Then let’s see how you fare.” Agrippa spread his arms wide. “And maybe, if you actually win, I’ll be tempted to share with you Pat’s true whereabouts. How’s that for incentive?” Then his face erupted in rage once more. “Tear him to fucking shreds!”

Legosi raised his fists.

The Dokugumi had been poised to charge, but now all of them faltered, and even Agrippa took a shocked step back. The black market had gone even blacker, the sky impossibly dark, the air stinking and moist; in their shock, some of the lizards thought they saw the construction yard flanked by pillars of curved bone, or saw bloodred eyes looming overhead larger than the moon. As if they had all suddenly manifested within a set of gargantuan jaws, ready to snap shut.

And Legosi, as he stood ready to fight, felt a fleeting weight on his shoulder and a voice in his ear, but not the one from before – this was rough but companionable, as if someone unseen had draped their arm around him. The voice was vaguely familiar: *“You better have enough fun for both of us, wolf.”*

The voice left. The darkness fled. It was just him and the Dokugumi, alone at the edge of the doomed market. In the distance was a sound like rolling thunder, a raised chorus of sirens. A great light had bloomed in the city beyond.

Legosi roared, *“Step forward if you want to die!”*

Something Beautiful Is Going to Happen

Uptown, life continued.

The city became further steeped in blood by the day, the black market a tumor festering in its meat, but most of its civilians were unconcerned. They were aware of the spiking predation rate, especially if they were smaller herbivores, but those troubles were like the moon, far away and presently concealed. The police were everywhere, the Beastar's spire watched them vigilantly, and the night was young, if slightly damp. Uptown was wide and bright and clean. Uptown made its own color, rainbows of zirconium light that spilled out from glass facades and mounted big-screen tv's, fighting back this season's insufferable gray. Animals milled about, phones bared, umbrellas on their shoulders, carnivore and herbivore brushing shoulders.

Meteor Square was a wide flagstone plaza set at the conjunction of numerous major roads – if one were to map out the city like an anatomical diagram, this wouldn't be far from the heart. Major holidays were celebrated here, and since animals liked to celebrate most of their holidays with dazzling constructions of light and color, the square was made to take full advantage. It was ringed by a massive open walkway, wide enough to accommodate a half-dozen bears shoulder-to-shoulder and high enough to allow giraffes safe passage underneath, and the walkway's underside and the square's flagstones were set with flecks of glass that had been carefully tempered and glazed. These flecks would take the lights from a Meteor Festival display and magnify them without turning them blinding, so that the animals on the square would feel as though they were standing in a prism, a cloud of multicolored stars.

There was none of that today. The square was unadorned, the glass flecks were dull as Formica. But animals congregated here anyway, gossiping in clusters or holding cardboard cups of steaming coffee in their hands. In these gray days, they looked at the empty space and imagined how it would be filled in better days to come.

There were always a few police officers stationed here, though it was generally considered to be a dull beat; the place could get crowded, but it was just way too open for any enterprising mugger or predator to get away safely. One cop patrolling the square today wouldn't have to worry about obstacles in any case – he was a Shiras moose, the herbivorous equivalent of a light truck. His antlers alone were so big they formed a natural raincatcher. Heaven help anyone who took an impact from those things.

Not that he wanted to charge into something. Goodness, no. Best to keep it boring.

He wandered the periphery of the square, humming tunelessly, the rain dotting his cap-brim. Every so often he would cast a worried glance in the direction of the black market. Chief Darth had sent out a memo earlier that week that had been co-signed with that female investigator from CHIU, something about the terrorists who'd been blowing up the place casting their eyes into the city proper. It had been long on ominousness but short on details, and had mostly just succeeded in giving rank-and-file cops like himself anxiety. He was big, but not bomb-proof.

Still, he projected confidence, if only for the civilians' sakes. Most of them were acting like this was any other evening. He wanted it to stay that way.

He ascended the walkway (carefully, this thing was solidly built but every time he climbed it he was worried about dropping through the floor) and started to walk its edge. He saw another blue-capped officer down below and waved. Then he stopped, and squinted. Someone was here alone.

Lots of animals were here alone, of course, but this one at the walkway's railing was especially so; there was a half-ring of deserted space around her, as if she projected some kind of solitude field. It was a female coyote in a bulky overcoat, threadbare velour, moose-hide brown. She had a plain gray shawl on her head that was already further discolored by raindrops. She stood there like she was waiting for a train, hands loose at her sides. He watched her for maybe two full minutes, but she never moved.

The officer approached her. When he stepped into that deserted space, her head twitched in his direction, fast enough to make his heart jump, but her stance was still relaxed, somehow morose. He tilted his cap at her in greeting.

"Evening, ma'am," he said. "Everything alright?"

She held her gaze for several seconds and once again his pulse skipped oddly. There was no reason for it – she was a carnivore, true, but he could have easily picked her up in one hand, and besides, there was no sign of hunger or meat-drunkenness in that copper-colored eye.

"I used to come here often," she said. "With my son."

Aha, that explained it. Nostalgia plus empty-nest syndrome. He had to fend off calls from his own mother every other week for the same reason. He remained obediently still as she turned back to the square and kept talking.

"We lived in a poor neighborhood," she said. "Just the two of us. Not much to look at. But he'd always ask me to take him here whenever there was a celebration being held. He loved the colors. For the first few years he was afraid of getting lost in the crowd, but I told him it would be okay. One of his ears was all white, you see. I said to him that if we were ever separated, I'd be able to find him by that ear. My guiding star, I called it. He liked that."

"He sounds like a good kid," said the officer.

"In his last year of high school he got in a fight," she said, in that same neutral tone. "With an herbivore, a bull. A bull bully. That's funny, isn't it." Neither of them laughed. "He didn't win, but he ended up using his teeth. There were witnesses. His record was marked. Juvenile predation. And I'm sure you can figure out the rest. His college applications were denied, his scholarships were revoked. And so on."

He'd realized his mistake here far too late. On the force, there were always stories from cops who'd gotten trapped in conversations by carnivores who'd been hit with predation offenses or knew someone else who had, and none of them ended well – you could either bluster your way out of it or offer platitudes until they gave up yelling and went away. But this female,

with her dead and impassionate voice, didn't sound like she was protesting the offense, merely laying it out in front of him like a dissected carcass. Trying to back out of this conversation now would be downright shameful. He looked around as if one of his fellow officers would turn up to save him.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, ma'am. But there are appeals courts for this sort of thing. I could give you a few recommendations..."

"Oh, he picked himself back up. He was depressed for a while, but I stayed patient with him. I kept him at home as the beginning of the college year came and went. Eventually he got a job in a garage downtown and that helped him move past it. He started telling me stories about his co-workers, he got pay raises. It wasn't long before he was making more money than me."

"Glad to hear it," he said, smiling. But she stayed quiet, and his smile curdled. He could hear the creak of a trap about to snap shut.

"He didn't get up for work one morning," she said. "I went into his room and there he was, hanging from the ceiling. But first he'd ripped out one of his teeth, and used it to carve a note into the floor. It said, *'I can't get used to it.'*" Rain traced its spiky calligraphy in the folds of her coat. "It had been eating away at him all that time. I must have stopped noticing. It was easier that way."

The officer stood dumbly as she raised her head up, toward the smothered sky.

"It's strange," she said. "I knew the pain wouldn't leave me, no matter what anyone said. But the love I had for him hasn't gone, either. A terrible warmth. Every day, it fills me to bursting and hollows me out." She squeezed her eyes shut and fresh dark trails ran from their corners, staining her fur. "What has it reduced me to, I wonder. Or maybe I haven't changed at all. Maybe we never can."

"I won't pretend to know what you've gone through," he said. Fumbling for the right platitude. "What you're feeling now is...look, I'm sorry to hear what happened to your son, but things will get better. We have to believe that."

She smiled then, and the officer was so relieved to see it that he didn't notice the bitterness at its edges until she turned to face him fully and reached into the pocket of her coat. Her hand emerged holding a small angular device, black plastic with a prominent trigger. In the final moments of his life, the officer thought it looked like a slot-car remote. With her other hand she pulled away the shawl and exposed her mismatched ears, and the remaining one twitched as she tugged aside her coat, revealing the lusterless black bricks strapped to her body underneath.

"No, we don't," she said. "But I'm sure it brought you a little comfort to think so."

He lunged at her as she pressed the trigger and the light swallowed them both, an incandescent burst that swept across Meteor Square and was reflected a thousandfold on its stones, so that the explosion's nova fractured into innumerable motes to everyone witnessing – from the streets, the high windows, from the stalled and screeching cars nearby. But the

ones closest had the finest view of that radiance, in the instant before the explosion's handclap and the screaming that would follow; these peaceful animals who, if they were looking in the right direction, would see razor-edged flecks of glass headed toward them like comets, as the flaming rag of the Butcher's shawl spiraled into the night.

* * *

The storm gathered. The TV news had promised another evening of inoffensive rain but those animals with sharpened instincts or arthritic bones had felt the beginnings of something evil in the air. Over the ocean, the atmosphere stirred and whirled like the fumes over a witch's cauldron. The barely audible metronome of drops on windowpanes and atop car roofs grew louder. Rain gurgled in gutters and hissed down stormdrains. The city was trapped within its syncopation, that chaotic relentless beat.

Those who knew to listen heard Pat's voice in the drip.

"Ring the bell. It's time to eat."

There was a certain restaurant half a mile from Bebebe that served a far higher-class clientele; its seats were plush, its lights crystal, and its food was impeccably vegetarian but still able to replicate any rich red taste that its carnivore patrons required. The pucker-mouthed terrapin who served as its maître d' was greeting the restaurant's latest customers when the front doors blew open in a spit-spray of rain and wind. A black bear shuffled past, heavy-coated and so steeped in filth that shiny green veins of moss ran through his oily pelt. His black eyes caught the chandelier's light as he entered the dining area, unheeding of the maître d's increasingly hysterical requests. The diners dropped the forks and wrinkled their noses as the bear stood in the midst of all that splendor. A slow grin crawled sluglike into his face, and as the restaurant's staff closed in on him, he reached into his coat and filled the space with a light of his own.

"Bend low. Breathe deep. We can't change what we are and what we are is all we'll ever be. There are stories and hidden histories claiming that in days past, we animals were driven to protect one another. How the strongest of us dulled their fangs so they would never reach the throats of the weak. Lies. All lies. A civilization built on a festering lie. Can't you smell it, rotting underneath your feet? Doesn't the scent make your belly growl?"

Through the shopping district walked a female caracal, the wavering tufts of black hair atop her ears like exotic antennae. Her reflection warped funhouse in the glass-paned storefronts; her snout was stained salt-and-pepper, pockets of haggard skin beneath her eyes. She stopped in front of a store that advertised bridal dresses, mannequins that ranged in size from below her knee to well over her head dressed in flowing contrivances of milky pearls and lace. She laid her paw against the glass and smiled nostalgically, until her reflection re-asserted itself. Her reflections and the reflections of the pedestrians hovering behind her like stage props blotted out the display. The moment had passed. The dresses would not be worn.

"The truest stories are written anew every day, in clawmarks and bile and blood. You've walked through this putrid false peace with your hunger like a hole in you and the only time you ever felt sated was when you imagined tearing open every happy innocent face you saw. But they've been tearing at you the whole time. Devouring you, one strip at a time. They see

you in pain and they lick their lips. Eat or be eaten. How they know this, these so-called innocents. How they know it well."

The trains ran on, oblivious to the first few explosions. They circulated like tapeworms through the city's guts. The cars remained fairly full, passengers checking their phones to confirm appointments or text their friends hello or goodbye. Only a few of them went to their newsfeeds and saw the burst of updates sleet across their screens like a chain of firecrackers, and their faces no matter the shape went waxy with fear. In one car sat a honey badger made roly-poly by his coat, tapping his thumbs together with the train wheels' rhythm. Two months ago he'd brought a cleaver down on the deceased Melon's arm, reduced him to cutlets and bagged his offal. He closed his eyes and his small pink tongue snaked out as he folded his arms around himself, imagining these metal walls seizure and crumple around them, canned meat and red sauce splattered down the tunnel walls.

"All we are is appetite and we have but one source of satisfaction. Bite into the meat of another and you'll taste how they felt at the moment of their passing. That terror, that pain, is what we all crave. You've starved yourselves in service to a lie while those who knew better grew fat off your misery. Carnivores who drooled and reigned over trembling herbivores, herbivores who choked carnivores on the leash of the law. But there is a purer equality to be found. We can all go down together, to rest our heads on the block."

A Bengal fox, his body slender as if it had been wrung out like a sponge, slipped into a high-rise apartment building as another of its residents entered. The resident, a red panda who worked as a computer programmer several blocks away, raised an eyebrow at the newcomer but the fox held the door for him and walked into the lobby with confident purpose and so the panda mentally shrugged and went home to his bed and television set. The fox took the elevator to a room two floors higher and walked the halls, his dry-rotted sneakers caressing the plush carpet. He stopped in front of a door and casually drew a pistol and shot out the lock. The apartment inside was empty, undecorated, trapped in that liminal space between one renter and the next; it smelled of floor varnish and fresh paint. The fox paced its rooms, his face marked by a distant melancholy. He stared at walls. He stared at windows. He rested his forehead against a corner like a punished child. Finally he went to the bedroom and lay spread out on the floor and took out his detonator, and the hand that held it stretched out, caressing it, like it was the hand of another sleeper unseen.

"Trace now the empty pit in your stomachs. Find the nucleus of this gnawing. Rip it open and reveal a light that will at last allow them to see each other plain. Let them see the blood on their snouts and the ribbons of tender flesh caught between their teeth. In the brilliance of your feasting, they will know each other with delicious clarity."

A taxicab ripped its way down Center Street with its driver dead in the passenger seat, and the loll-tongued jackal who'd shot him hung his head out the passenger window and as he approached an intersection filled with honk and screech he held out his detonator like he was saying hello. A buzzard eagle, his wingfeathers torn and mutilated under his sleeves, ascended the fire escape of an office building still dotted with lit windows and then jumped, and halfway down became an airburst that blew a splintered hole in that pillar of glass. An emaciated lioness with a dragging clubfoot step entered the lobby of a hospital already being bombarded with phone calls and flung open her coat, letting the lobby of would-be patients

see what was inside with dinner-plate eyes; she counted to five as they flowed around her towards the door like sludge out a plughole, and then pulled her trigger.

The explosions dotted the cityscape, their lights forming a constellation of ruin. The rain struck pavement like applause. Pat slouched on somewhere else, always unseen save for his ceaseless expectoration, hood dripping drool and hands dripping blood and the decayed shadow beneath his coat leaving a slug-trail of corruption wherever he went. These animals had come to him in their hatred and vulnerability and he'd torn them open and scraped them clean and filled them with himself. His lunatic catechism chased them into the vitriolic darkness of their own despair and echoed in them even now, as they went forth and ate the city alive, bite by thundering bite.

"Herbivore. Carnivore. Predator. Prey. The marks and maps and laws denoting each made to paper over the truth of ourselves. There is no difference. We are all of us the same mongrel mix. A continuum of starvation. A mouth consuming itself. Always there is more pain to feed their appetites but never any relief. The hunger always creeps back in. So it is. So it ends."

Animals caught between blasts stampeded to whatever safe zones were shown to them, shepherded by vein-throated police screaming over the alarum of their sirens. They clutched purses and shopping bags and held their own coats above their heads against the rain's drumbeat. In one such mass, a tarsier monkey, barely waist-height to many of the surrounding animals, raised his lamplight orange eyes heavenward. The drops grew greasy and thick like drool from a colossal snout, and his expression sheened with rapture at their touch.

"No one wants to exist."

He reached into his coat. The Butchers marched on.

* * *

It was pandemonium inside the city's police HQ. Within minutes of the first recorded bombing, the offices were filled with an ear-splitting orchestra of ringing phones and it quickly got worse from there. Squad cars slalomed drunkenly out of the station's garage and into the howling chaos that the city was quickly becoming as the officers still inside frantically tried to learn where to go, what to do, as the Butchers' campaign spread uptown. The floor became obscured by drifts of paperwork knocked off desks in their scampering. Conference rooms stayed empty. No one could keep still.

The HQ's central office was a massive-open air chamber packed with desks, and right now it was swarming with cops like a kicked anthill. Through that crowd walked Chief Darth, and while his jowled face was stoic and set, the look in his eyes was that of someone struggling to wake up. An Alsatian sergeant ran up to him with a wad of papers in one clenched hand and his phone in the other, nearly getting bowled over by two other rushing officers on the way.

"Any news?" Darth asked him.

"We've got confirmation," the Alsatian panted. "At least twenty incidents so far and all the witness statements line up."

“Suicide bombers,” Darth growled. “Would someone care to remind me where we are? What *era*? Since when did my city become a war zone?”

“Your orders, sir?”

“We already have disaster protocols written up. I don’t give a damn about the cause, the solution should work just fine. Tell Dispatch to send officers to as many affected areas as possible and herd the survivors into safe zones. Kettle them, keep it orderly, frisk *any* carnivore wearing heavy clothing. Where’s that investigator from CHIU? I need to head her off before she contacts Central.”

“She’s with Sergeant Cromwell. They should be-”

“What is she doing with him?!” Darth barked. “Get them here. Now!”

The Alsatian scampered off, leaving Darth to stew. The phones had not stopped ringing for a moment.

The police had braced themselves for the worst, especially after Saya’s plan to ally with the black market’s remaining crime families had fallen through, but this had still blindsided them all. The Butchers, no doubt acting on Pat’s orders, had gone to places of their choosing with the Damned 44th’s toys in tow. They had no common species or target – the bombings spread out across almost the entire uptown metropolitan area, in residences, in shops, on the street. An explosion in an apartment complex had only resulted in injuries, but another in the subway had caused too many deaths to currently tally and had paralyzed the transit system for blocks around. Nowhere was safe. Hysteria was rising like floodwaters.

And in the echo of these blasts were the devourings, speckling the wall of carnage coming to them down the wire. As civil unrest grew and the police were forced to turn their attention elsewhere, meat-drunk carnivores were already snatching terrified herbivores off the street and sinking their teeth in. It wasn’t only going in one direction either; Darth had gotten several reports of grievous assault inflicted on carnivores by large-scale herbivores. The city was a centrifuge spinning madly out of control, its last vital bearing about to slip free.

Cromwell pushed his way towards Darth, clearing space for Investigator Saya to follow in his wake. Her expression was also composed even now, but her shirt was untucked and she kept compulsively smoothing out her blazer. As they approached, Darth glanced at his phone for the tenth time in as many minutes for any news from Yafya, but the Beastar was nowhere to be seen.

“Chief,” said Cromwell. “We were just about to find you.”

“And here I am. Welcome to the shitshow,” Darth said. “Mind sharing what you and the investigator were chatting about while everything went to hell?”

“She just got back from talking to Central,” Cromwell said, and Darth quietly died a little inside. “She was looking for you, but I stand out more in a crowd. Investigator?”

“I’ve appraised them of the situation.” Saya’s voice was like an over-tightened piano wire. “Their first reaction was to dispatch military police to the region in addition to your own forces.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Darth. “I’ll take whatever help I can get.”

“I urged them to hold back the order,” said Saya.

“What? Why?!”

“Please consider the entire situation, sir. The Butchers don’t have the numbers or equipment to continue this for long. The military police likely wouldn’t arrive here until after these bombings have concluded. But the unrest that would follow…”

“Right now this is mostly being confined to uptown,” Cromwell added. “The rest of the city’s freaking out, but they don’t think they’re in any danger yet. We can still choke this off if we keep a riot from starting. But if there’s tanks in our streets? It’ll be a signal to everyone that order’s collapsed for good.”

“We’re on the precipice of that already! Haven’t you heard about the devourings?”

“Yeah, in the afflicted zones. Now imagine that happening *everywhere*. Central won’t be able to stop it short of bombing us all into the ground.”

“I share Sergeant Cromwell’s opinion,” said Saya. “But even so, my advice only carries so much weight and the rest of Civic Harmony is also reporting in. If we don’t get this under control, Central *will* act.”

Darth grabbed his ears, pulled hard, counted backwards from three. “Fine. I’ll take it under consideration. We’re resorting to the standard disaster-relief playbook for now. Cromwell, the rank-and-file listens to you, so slap sense into as many of them as you can and get down to-”

His phone buzzed. He wrestled it out of his pocket, and both Cromwell and Saya noted the relief that passed over Darth’s face.

“Good news?” Cromwell asked.

“It’s the Beastar. He’s waiting for us in the lobby. Investigator, you’re with me. Let’s go!”

He headed off. Saya followed. Cromwell also followed, and when Saya cast a confused look backward he put a finger to his lips and gestured for her to hurry on.

The lobby, normally silent as a church, had also fallen into disarray. The front gates outside were mobbed with civilians seeking refuge and officers shouting themselves hoarse for calm. More cops were headed outside, pushing through the mob’s grasping hands, but there were more clusters of them just standing around uncertainly, watching some kind of commotion in the room’s center. Darth arrived and shouted at them to get back to work, and as they cleared away he too saw what had caught their attention.

Yafya was there, in his full tactical suit. So was Gosha. They were in the middle of an argument, one that appeared to have reached the phase where neither side could really hear what the other was saying over the sound of their own shouts. Of the two, Gosha was the more frantic; the elderly lizard gesticulated wildly, even grabbed Yafya's shoulders in a way that could have gone very badly for him if the surrounding police weren't already on their way somewhere else. But Yafya noticed Darth – that peripheral vision of his never failed to unsettle the chief – and pushed Gosha away, tried to hold him at arm's length and appear dignified at the same time.

“Chief Darth. My apologies for the tardiness. I'm aware of the present crisis. Myself and the Cornered Rats are at your-”

“Yafya, please!” Gosha cried. “If you won't let me go then ask him to send somebody. Just *one!*”

Cromwell stepped forward. “Why are you releasing him at a time like this, you idiot? We put him in that cell for his safety! Do things look safe to you right now?”

Darth turned to Cromwell. “What are you still doing here?!” He turned back to Gosha. “What *is* he doing here?!”

Yafya squeezed his eyes shut and ran his hands down the length of his head. One could see him wishing for his blindfold. The station had become a very over-stimulating place.

“I believed that in the current circumstances, the holding cells weren't the best place for him,” he said slowly. “I wanted to move him to my private quarters before I headed out. And I still intend to do so, if he would just calm down and listen to the damn authorities- wait, Gosha, get back here!”

But Gosha had already run up to Darth, hands clasped, begging. “It's true, isn't it? My grandson broke quarantine or whatever you want to call it. Don't you have some way to track him? I just want to know if he's okay!”

“Oh, God dammit,” Cromwell groaned.

“Grandson? That wolf?” Darth took a cautious step back, watching Gosha's fangs. “Sergeant, you knew about this?”

“The apartment sensor went off several hours ago. I sent a couple patrol officers down there and they didn't find any signs of a struggle, so he probably just walked out the door. I was going to let you know, but then...” He held his arms out wide. “All of *this* happened.”

“Did he know something we didn't?” Saya mused.

“What does it matter now? If he's gone back to the black market then there's no way in hell we can send anyone for him. Yafya, why did you let this slip? Did you want to give his grandpa a conniption?”

“He didn’t tell me anything. I could see it on his face the second he sprang me loose,” Gosha said. “We might’ve fallen out of touch but he can’t keep secrets from me.”

“Regrettably true,” Yafya muttered.

“If you can’t spare the forces then at least don’t keep me here. I’ll find him myself if I have to. You can arrest me properly afterward if you want, just let me go!”

“Gosha, it’s getting more dangerous out there by the second!” said Yafya. “Do you think Legosi wants you to risk your life for him?!”

Gosha whirled, and now his eyes were brimming with tears. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather risk it on. He’s all I have left!”

“I couldn’t possibly give less of a damn about this spat,” Darth growled. “Sergeant, escort the reptile out of here before he starts dripping venom on my floor. And Yafya, sir, we need to get together with Investigator Saya and discuss the best response for...” He trailed off, eyeing the lobby doors. “Oh, what fresh hell is this?”

Two more officers had shouldered their way into the building, an Airedale and an olive baboon. Each of them gripped the arm of a stringy leopard in a horrendous disco-cut suit that may have once had been black but had gone almost the color of mothwings. The suit’s cut exposed the wearer’s chest past his collarbone, and they all saw the faded tattoos printed onto the fur underneath.

The Airedale saluted, but the baboon held on to their escort. His solemn simian countenance bore a distinctly shellshocked look. The situation outside hadn’t been kind to either of them.

“You have ten seconds to explain,” Darth said.

“Sir. We were on patrol when this animal practically threw himself in front of our squad car. He says that he’s Cruce of the Madaragumi, sir.”

“Cruce? *Silverhead* Cruce?”

“I’d say those tattoos are a solid giveaway,” Cromwell grunted. “Nice suit. Been a while since you’ve worn anything besides that dumbass samurai getup, eh, cat?”

The baboon released him and he shuffled forward, carefully, as if the marbled floor was lined with landmines. He kept nervously glancing at Yafya in particular as he inched forward; several more cops had trickled into the lobby during this spectacle, and all of them had their hands on their guns. Cruce’s degraded state was no secret to the police either, but no one was about to let their guard down around a Family head.

“Please help,” he said.

“If it’s shelter you’re looking for then I’d be happy to show you to a cell,” Darth said acidly. “Your stay may be rather long, however.”

“Not me. Don’t care what happens to me.” He was wracked by a sudden spasm and took a deep, rattling breath before steadying himself once more. “Pat. It’s the market.”

“Yes, you’ve been harboring him there all this time. And don’t think you’ll escape the consequences of that no matter what may-”

“Chief Darth, please,” Saya said, and Darth begrudgingly fell silent. “What about the black market?”

“He wired it up,” Cruce said. “All the bombs he had left. I don’t know how many there are but I know what’ll happen if they blow. He doesn’t leave anything for anyone.”

This piece of information spread through the lobby, like a drop of ink in water.

“Your point?” Yafya said coolly.

Cromwell whirled on him, fangs bared, and might have rushed him if Saya hadn’t gripped his cuff. “How many times do I have to tell you that *civilians live there*, you goddam psycho?!”

“The Sergeant’s point is noted,” said Darth. “But given the crisis we’re presently facing and the threats already present in that district, we can’t be expected to prioritize...Investigator? Investigator Saya, what’s wrong?”

She was frozen like that, holding on to Cromwell’s shirtsleeve, her aquiline face frozen with pupils wide. For the first time since she’d arrived at the precinct, Saya actually looked like prey.

“The animals who reside in the market district,” she said. “I assume they’re all carnivores?”

“Obviously. If any herbivores did live there then they’d be a rounding error,” Cromwell said. “Figured someone from CHIU would realize...oh. Oh, shit.”

“Would someone care to fill me in?” Darth snapped. Cromwell’s face had acquired the same glaze of horror as Saya’s. She released the sergeant, again tried to smooth the ineradicable wrinkles in her jacket.

“Even if my estimates of Pat’s stockpile were on the generous side, he would have used too much of his explosives on these suicide bombings to level the black market entirely,” she said. “But that doesn’t matter. He doesn’t intend to kill the remaining animals there. He wants to *displace* them. Smoke them out.”

“You told us yourself, Chief,” said Cromwell. “Civil unrest is at a fever pitch. What happens when the smoke clears, the bodies get tallied, and we suddenly have hundreds more homeless, starving, dirt-poor carnivores flooding the city? That’s not even counting the loss of the meat trade, or whatever the hell Central does in response-”

“I get it,” Darth said tightly.

“There will be riots at the bare minimum,” Saya said. “The relationship between herbivores and carnivores will schism. The whole country will be watching...in the worst-case scenario,

tonight might spark off another war.”

Darth staggered back until he bumped into the receptionist’s unmanned desk and gripped it like a ship’s mast in a hurricane. He looked to the Beastar for guidance but Yafya had locked in place. He appeared to be in no mood to offer suggestions.

“There’s just too much risk,” he said. “The Butchers and the Families will be swarming the place and we don’t have enough animals to disarm the bombs, let alone find them!”

“I can find them,” Cruce said. “Renne showed me. All the secret places. Anywhere Pat would want to hide them. My gang already found a few. And no one else will be there. Agrippa’s gone to hide and the lions are doing something, I think they’re going to attack the rest of the Butchers in the black market. This is our only chance. We need help.” He collapsed to his knees and kowtowed to the police, sobbing. “Please. It’s our home. Don’t let them take that from us, too. Don’t-”

He made no sound when it happened. Yafya dashed forward and took a running punt right into the leopard’s ribs and though his bones bent concave around the toe of the Beastar’s sneaker he didn’t cry out or maybe couldn’t, all his breath stolen away; there was only a wet *crunch* and Cruce was lifted off the floor and hit it again rolling, seizing up on his back, hands to his chest. His mouth yawned open wide, showing off his decay-spotted teeth as he struggled for air. Yafya advanced on him, nostrils huffing steam.

“I’ve had enough of this insane bastard,” Cromwell snarled, but before he could move he felt Darth’s claws dig into his shoulder, the bloodhound’s own breath hot against his ear.

“One more move and I will take away your badge and march you into the cells myself,” he said. “Be told, Sergeant.”

Cruce feebly tried to edge back as Yafya approached but the horse stamped on his neck and pinned him to the spot. His oblong black head hung above Cruce like a bombshell. His voice was calm, his gaze clouded and faraway.

“Very clever of you,” he said. “The one silver lining of this nightmare is that you and all your repulsive kind would be stamped out for good, but now here you come begging us to save you. Like we’d be doing ourselves a favor. I think that after we’re done saving the city, I’ll come for the rest of the Madaragumi personally.”

Cruce clutched Yafya’s ankle – not violently but pleadingly, asking the Beastar for some kind of mercy, even as his own bloodshot eyes bulged and rolled at the edge of consciousness. Yafya responded by increasing the pressure on his throat, choking him by inches, and as the weight on Cruce increased, the horse’s voice rose:

“You vermin. Rancid, wretched carnivore filth. I gave my life trying to create a perfect society, and because of you it’s on the brink of collapse!” He was screaming now, lips frosted with froth, his drool spilling freely onto Cruce’s tattooed chest. “Help you? You poison everything you touch! *I should have killed you all when I had the chance!*”

The police were all watching this grisly display and yet no one saw Gosha move until it happened. Maybe it was sheer agility on the old reptile's part, or maybe a lifetime of meekly keeping his head under the radar had enhanced his kind's already-impressive powers of stealth. Either way, one moment Yafya stood there with his foot on Cruce's neck and the next he was flying back, his mane splayed around his head like runners of cloth, and when he hit the ground he skidded and rolled until he crashed into the far wall. Gosha stood where he had been, his check-flannel shirtsleeve threatening to pop its seams from the bulging muscles underneath. Only then did the officers snap out of it, and they all raised their guns at once.

"He attacked the Beastar!"

"Get down on the ground with your hands on your head!"

"Watch the venom, one bite and you're done for!"

"Have you all lost your goddamn minds?!" Cromwell roared. "Stand down, you idiots!"

Darth said, "They will do no such thing. I'm in charge here, Sergeant, and the punishment for assaulting a Beastar is very-"

"Leave him alone," Yafya croaked.

He pushed himself up from the ground and onto one knee, limbs all wobbling. There was a bright rivulet of blood coming from one nostril and the indents of Gosha's knuckles were still printed on his flesh. He and Gosha stared each other down for what felt like a year, and while neither moved during this time all in attendance had the sensation that a great deal was being communicated between them. Then Yafya looked to Darth, his gaze weary, but clear.

"The Cornered Rats can disarm the bombs," he said. "I'll ask them to support any officers you send. But you have to move quickly. They'll have trouble navigating the city if this storm gets any worse."

Darth sputtered. "I don't...why are you..the authority for this is completely..."

"I'll contact PSBT," said Cromwell, pushing Darth aside. "They're not doing shit in the city but their sniffers should be enough to locate any bombs that Cruce and the Madaragumi can't." He snapped his fingers at one of the patrol officers and they nodded and took off running, as Darth watched on helplessly. "Anything else?"

"Legosi," said Yafya, standing. "If history is anything to go by, he'll be wherever danger is thickest. If you're headed to the market anyway..."

"I'll lead the search party myself. You two," he said, pointing to the cops who'd brought in Cruce. "I want trackers and at least one medic specializing in large canines. We move out in ten. Go!"

They jolted to attention and ran into the station. On the way, they passed the Alsatian whom Darth had spoken to earlier. Sometime between then and now he appeared to have aged decades. His fur looked on the verge of falling out.

“Sir?” he said. The word carried a heavy freight of doom.

“What is it,” said Darth, eyes shut.

“Dispatch was trying to contact you but you weren’t answering your phone. We have a hostage situation in B-Strike. Three bombers, we don’t know how many civilians.” He looked at Yafya. “They’re demanding to see the Beastar.”

“Then that’s what they’ll get,” said Yafya. “I’m going out. Someone escort this Komodo dragon to my quarters, please.”

“This sounds like a trap,” Gosha said.

“It’s my job. Just stay put, Gosha. Please. Give your grandson somebody to come home to.”

Then, rapid heel-clicks on the marble. Saya had darted out from behind Darth. Yafya didn’t turn to look at her, not that he needed to; his muzzle crinkled in anticipation of what she would say.

“I would like to escort the Beastar,” she said. “If that’s acceptable. We can take my car.”

“Want to feel like you’re making a contribution?” Yafya asked bitterly. “What would the rest of CHIU think?”

“Investigators are encouraged to be independent,” she said politely, and under that politeness was the unspoken follow-up: *Central can go pound sand*. Yafya paused, then set off again, gesturing for her to follow.

The lobby was left in stunned silence after their departure. Gosha moved first; he bent down and offered a hand to Cruce, who hadn’t dared blink during the whole standoff.

“Are you alright, son?” he asked.

Cruce coughed and took his hand. “I’ll be okay. Took a lot of beatings lately. That one kinda cleared my head, I think.”

“Someone bring this reptile to the Beastar’s penthouse,” Darth said stiffly. “I need to go see how many more animals have died in the last twenty minutes.”

“Is it really that bad?” Gosha asked quietly as he pulled Cruce up. “I’ve been stuck in here all this time.”

Cruce was a sorry sight by default, but the look he gave Gosha was even sorer – pitying, in fact. “That bad and worse. I saw what Pat did to the Inarigumi. He’d do it to all of us, if he could.”

“Sounds like you lost someone you care about,” he said. “My condolences, for what it’s worth.”

“Thanks. But your grandson...look, if he’s going after Pat then he might not even make it that far. The Dokugumi had it out for him. They’re waiting for him to come.”

The Alsatian officer took Gosha by the shoulder, with infinite care, as if the lizard was a skinful of venom waiting to burst. At his touch, Gosha obediently stepped away from Cruce, but something passed over his face like bad weather, almost enough to drop the leopard to his knees again.

“That so,” Gosha said. “Too bad for the Dokugumi, then.”

* * *

Yafya’s mane was already soaked by the time they made it to Saya’s car. The animals outside had given him wary looks as he’d passed; the police standing guard at the HQ hadn’t been able to completely hide the view of what had transpired between him and Cruce. As Saya pulled out into the street he contacted the Cornered Rats and told them to lend aid to the officers at the black market.

“Not sparing any backup for yourself?” Saya asked after Yafya hung up. The windshield wipers fought back the spattering rain.

“No point. The roads are treacherous for small animals in conditions like these. They’ll have to tag along with the officers heading to the scene.”

“Do you have a plan? You’re not even armed.” Her own service revolver could be glimpsed under her blazer.

“The police on-site will be. I can procure a weapon from them if I have to. But given the Butchers’ methods thus far, I doubt they’d be content with just shooting me, and I’m not easily ambushed.”

“Understood.”

Choking silence descended. The car wasn’t enough to insulate them from the madness outside – the city streets were swallowed in pulsing nebulae of light from squad cars and ambulances, animals directed in throbbing, scampering clusters from one corner to the next. The bombings were isolated enough so that their actual marks were nowhere to be seen but the echo of their effects was everywhere, in the cordons tying off intersections and jostling mobs of pedestrians. Yafya’s peripheral vision wouldn’t let him rest. He saw animals outside of the police’s aegis baring their teeth, coming to blows. Near one shattered shopfront was a small body encircled by police tape and covered in a sheet. He rubbed his bruised face as an excuse to cover his eye, blot out half the world.

“Are you alright?” Saya asked. She’d been snared in his other eye’s range of vision, so he didn’t have to turn to note her expressionlessness, the way she rigidly gripped the wheel.

“When we last spoke,” he said dully, “you told me that herbivores could be just as cruel as carnivores.”

“Not in those exact words, but yes. Essentially.”

“I must have given you a fine example back there.”

The windshield wipers’ squeaking counted off the seconds it took her to reply. “That old reptile packed quite a punch.”

“Yes. I knew him in his prime.”

“I thought so.”

“What?”

“It’s like you said. You’re not easily ambushed. With your range of vision, you must have seen him coming. You knew that you’d lost control. You needed someone to stop you.” She hit her blinkers, turned, continued on. “Maybe that’s why you wanted to see him in the first place. To keep you grounded. The two of you must be very close.”

He’d gone still. Droplets coursed cold down the small of his back.

“I have a confession to make,” said Saya. “Contacting the Families was only half of my strategy to counter the Butchers. I believed that stabilizing the black market would be our best chance of slowing them down, so I also contacted city hall and Central to have provisions delivered there. Vegetarian, of course, but I thought that if they weren’t starving then Pat’s momentum would be blunted.” She sighed. “But I misread his intent. The shipments were meant to arrive tomorrow. Who knows if they’ll do any good now.”

“You kept that a secret from me,” Yafya said.

“Yes. Given your earlier statements regarding the black market, I didn’t think you’d approve.”

“I don’t. But it’s a better plan than any I would have made.” He angled his head toward her. “Cromwell told me that you used to be in this precinct. I know you’re acting with the city’s best interests in mind.”

This information settled into her skin. She licked her lips for the briefest moment. Saya was the type to keep herself under such tight control that every gesture and movement opened her up like a faultline.

They found their first bomb site. The intersection ahead was blocked and not just by a police cordon; this Butcher had driven a taxi into its center and set off their vest, turning the vehicle into a bomb of its own that had sent shrapnel into every car adjoining. Now the roads were a snarl of stilled metal and bloodstains, the paramedics still wrestling the last few injured into their ambulances.

“Shit,” Saya said under her breath.

“Just go around. We’re not far.”

“I know.”

“You’ve been to B-Strike?”

“Everyone has.” She backed the car up, turned, moved on.

“Tell me about it?”

Her face scrunched in suspicion for a moment, but when he glanced to Yafya all she saw was an old horse rocking in place. He’d stopped cradling his face and started massaging his hip instead. His eyes were shut.

“My friends brought me there when I graduated into the force,” she said. “Feels like forever ago. Do you know what pronking is?”

“Vaguely.”

“Ridiculous word. It’s something gazelles and antelopes do when we run at high speeds. We start to…bounce, I guess you could call it. It’s like a compulsion, I think it’s to show off our leg strength. It looks asinine and it’s just liable to get someone hurt if you do it out on the street, but B-Strike has a track where we could sprint all we wanted.” Her ears slowly pinned back. “I’ve never run so fast, before or since.”

“It’s okay,” said Yafya. “We’ll make it in time.”

“Okay.”

The curved glass polygon of B-Strike loomed, its marquee painting the pavement below in toxic colors that blended with the mélange of police bobble-lights to form a palette of hallucinogen. The sight made Yafya’s overheated eyes simmer. Squad cars clustered like lacquered beetles half a block away. Saya hit the brakes and unclipped her seatbelt.

“You go first,” he said to her. “They’ll be relieved to see a badge, CHIU or otherwise.”

“Understood,” she said.

They stepped out and were backslapped by the downpour. Yafya held an arm over his face to abate the pressure. Saya rushed into the core of that light, holding her badge in front of her like a warding.

“Investigator Saya with Civic Harmony! I’m here with Beastar Yafya! What’s the situation?”

A capped peregrine falcon saluted, his beak clacking with nerves like novelty teeth. “Sir, ma’am! We’ve got bombers in the lobby, the cafeteria, and the top spa level. I tried to fly up and get a better look but there’s just too much rain!”

“How many hostages are we looking at?” Yafya asked.

“Hard to tell, but accounts from the animals who managed to escape say it has to be at least forty to fifty. We don’t know the bombs’ blast radius but they’re being held at gunpoint.”

He looked up at the building. “That should make the bombers easy to find, at least.”

“Sir, you’re going in alone?”

“It’s me they want. I assume they’re trying to finish the job their boss started. But I’m not so easily beaten.” He stopped, squinted. “Wait. Somebody just came out!”

A rotund white shape had indeed emerged from the entrance, bounding towards the police. They shouted warnings and raised their revolvers but Yafya rushed past them and Saya, arms spread out. “Stop! Hold your fire, it’s one of the hostages!”

As the animal drew closer they could see it was a springbok, young and male and lithe, his antlers two slender parentheses jutting from his scalp. He was wearing a cream-colored puffer jacket that rendered him absurd; his skinny legs stuck out from the garment like toothpicks in a marshmallow. He slipped and collapsed, and Yafya approached him, bent down so their eyes would meet.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

The springbok could barely talk through his gasping. “Not hurt. But. They let me out. Wanted me to tell...”

“Tell us what? They sent you to deliver a message?”

“The Beastar. You’re the Beastar?”

“Yes I am,” said Yafya. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe.”

The springbok swallowed. He smiled. He smiled more. His face split open into something like ecstasy. And only then did Yafya notice the unnatural way the smears of surrounding light glinted off the herbivore’s right eye – it was made of glass.

The space between his next heartbeats was endless. All his skeleton was stone. His legs were folded uselessly beneath him and his arms were joined at his sockets but wouldn’t obey the mind that had no commands to give anyway. The strobing light pulsated in that orb mirror and this herbivore’s hand was already in the pocket of his jacket, thumb flexing, ready to press.

The explosion came and Yafya fell back. For an instant he viewed himself as if from above, as if his consciousness had been transplanted into one of the raindrops falling to mix in with the gory heap he had become. It was only when the water continued to patter on his snout that he realized he wasn’t dead and opened his eyes and saw the springbok lying there, still grinning, a neat red hole drilled into his head above his healthy eye. His jacket was hitched up just enough to expose the lining of black bricks underneath.

The gunshot had come from his blind spot. He turned and saw Saya, standing with revolver raised. Her own dark herbivore eyes were pinned wide, unblinking.

From within B-Strike’s upper floor emerged a thunderclap that flashed behind its windows and then blasted them out to join the downpour, a meteor shower of tumbling glass. In its

wake were two more, a pair of rapid handclaps like turning off a light, and the building's center and foundation were likewise ruptured. Saya's gun dropped and her arms went limp and she stared at the building like the shell of something burnt forever. Then her features hardened.

"Get in there, all of you! We need to help the injured!" As the police scrambled she ran up next to Yafya, who still knelt as if in penitence. "This was all a setup. We should get someone else here to defuse that bomb vest while the others look for survivors. Are you okay?" She shook his shoulder. "Yafya, answer me!"

He didn't respond. He couldn't hear. His breath was a bellows. His panoramic vision took it all in – Saya's water-studded face, the springbok's prostrate and defused corpse, the shapes of buildings now gone so foreign, the scarred shape of B-Strike. From one window dangled a small arm that the distance rendered anonymous, shorn of species, grasping, drowning, limp.

Somewhere an alley drooled a shallow pink river, rainwater now flavored with salt penny wamth. Somewhere a pair of young wolves cried out and struggled for shelter in each other's arms as a screaming horde of herbivores tore their garments loose in search of the bombs beneath. Somewhere in a gutter was a shawl now reduced to a cake of ash, trickling into the pound and howl of the sewers. And the raindrops battened down upon it all, they struck the pavement and ricocheted up in parabola, they danced and stomped and cavorted and cartwheeled, and at last bowed low as if to say: *Thank you for the meal.*

Blue Blood Burns Blue

He stood before the twin graves with the Shishigumi massed at his back. Raindrops pattered on the shoulders of his trenchcoat; they drove pinholes into the mounds as if eager to join Free and Dolph in their burial. He didn't feel the drops, or the woodgrain of the cane clasped in his hands, or the myriad itches and aches that wracked his defective body. He let his memories of the two lions unspool like film, and hoped that would be tribute enough.

"Is there anything you'd like to say, boss?" Agata asked timidly. "About Free, I mean."

Louis didn't turn around. "I didn't know him for long. But it's my belief that Free lived the sort of life that speaks for itself. Our actions tonight will serve as his eulogy."

The lions glanced among each other, quietly impressed. It was a more inspired sendoff than any of them would have come up with. But the way Louis' ears drooped suggested that he wasn't very proud of it. Miguel stepped up, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You did save him," he said. "Whether you believe it or not."

"He doesn't look saved to me," Louis said bitterly.

"I don't want to guess at the hell that the Butchers put him through. But after we took him off your shoulders, he was at peace. That kind of death is a victory in itself for animals like us."

"He said something similar to me after Ibuki died. I didn't find that very convincing, either."

"It's a fact," said Miguel. "We in the Shishigumi don't expect any kind of fortunate end. For the longest time we lived without anything to hope for or believe in, except that the consequences of our misdeeds could be held off one more day. You changed all that. No matter what happens tonight, know this: we are better for having met you."

The other lions murmured in agreement. Louis was sculpture-still. He could feel eyes on him – not from the Shishigumi, not with the flat hate of the Butchers, but soft and transparent as mist.

"I've been here long enough," he said. "Let's continue this conversation inside."

The ground floor of the Shishigumi's tower had been redecorated. Pistols and spare magazines were laid out in the floor in a neat pattern, a trigram of impending bloodshed. The boards creaked under Louis' cane as he paced across this arsenal, and he stopped and stared at one item in particular.

"Is that new?" he said.

"Very. It was a gift," said Miguel, walking over to it. "We informed Gouhin about our plans for the evening like you said. He promised to use his clinic to give other animals shelter if

they needed it, and then he told us to fuck off. Fair enough, we thought. Except he decided to give this to us on the way out. Said we'd have more use for it."

Miguel hoisted up Gouhin's machine gun, cradled it in his arms. Its ammo bandolier lay curled at his feet like a gilded snakeskin. Dope looked pained at the sight of it.

"That's the same one he used to light us up at the courtyard when Legosi came calling. I'm getting trauma flashbacks, here."

"Hope you know how to use that, Miguel," Jimma said dryly. "You've seen how jacked that panda is. I'm pretty sure the recoil would blow my arms outta their sockets."

"I could handle it," said Hino. "Briefly."

"Be a shame to let it go to waste," said Miguel, putting it back down. "The rest of what we got is small arms, plus a few vests. Nothing in your size, boss, but we did have something else. Agata, go ahead."

Agata scampered over to Louis and bowed, arms out. Proffered in his giant paws were the pistol and switchblade that Louis had brought into the black market yesterday, still in their holsters.

"It's not the same caliber as ours, so we don't have any more ammo for it," said Dope. "But that shouldn't be a problem. We'll be your guns for this, boss." Beside him, Sabu held up a hand, pointer and middle fingers extended, miming a cocked trigger.

Louis stared at the weapons. He ran a finger over the grain of their holsters. Then he gently folded Agata's hand over the gun and stepped away. Agata looked up, confused.

"Not yet," said Louis. "I'd like to address you all before we get ready."

Agata straightened up. "You want to go to the office? Just a fair warning, it's in pretty lousy shape."

"No. I had a different room in mind." He headed for the stairs. "Follow me."

The lions patiently marched after him in single file as he hobbled up the flights. He got off on the third floor, and then, all at once, they knew exactly where he intended to go. Miguel bent next to his ear as Louis flung open the doors to the Shishigumi's dining room.

"Boss, before we start, do you have a plan in mind for taking these guys out? Or is that gonna be part of the talk?"

"I go in through the front door. Alone."

"...with all due respect, Louis, that's not--"

"I'll explain on the way. Trust me."

The tables brooded in the gray light from the back window; through that hole, the brutalist outlines of the city could be seen through the mist. It was here that Louis had forced down his first helping of meat, completing his baptism into the Shishigumi's ranks. As he watched the group take their places, he contemplated how widely spaced the tables had become. So many empty settings.

He set his cane down beside the head table and knelt, wincing as his leg protested. The lions all watched him intently, and as he regarded them one by one, he again felt those softer eyes on the back of his neck. He gazed down into the table's polished surface and beside his fogged reflection he thought he could see two others, but didn't dare turn to check because in the end they were no different than a shadow at the corner of your eye – they would be there, so long as he didn't try to look.

They spoke to him, in the creak and groan of the Shishigumi's tower.

Dolph said, *"Apologize for nothing. They've thrown in their lot with you."*

Ibuki said, *"They know how dangerous it will be. Such is the life they've chosen."*

"Remember what they admired about you. What you admire in yourself, however faint it may be."

"You lit a fire in all of us. This is the time to stoke it."

"Leave no regrets on the table. Make it clear why you've returned."

"Don't be afraid, Louis."

Shouldn't Free be with you? Louis thought. He was met with only silence. *Never mind. His advice would have been terrible, anyway.*

He raised his head and spoke.

"You've all said time and again how grateful you were to have me as your leader. How fortunate. How my presence in the Shishigumi somehow made you better than what you were. But let us not forget the circumstances that brought me to this place. I came here intending to die. I'd grown weary it all – my frailty, the falseness of the life I'd been living, the expectations of those around me. That night, I thought to accomplish something that no one would have expected, and then surrender myself to the waiting mouths of the black market. It didn't work out that way. As you know."

He studied the faces around him. They remained attentive, but now there was some uncertainty going around – Sabu's eyes flicked back and forth between his fellows, Agata looked like he was fighting the urge to interrupt. Louis continued.

"Likewise, when I first accepted this position, I had no affection for any of you. I thought to use you as a way to resolve my own sense of identity. Remaining in the darkness of the black market, with the regal affectations I'd gained in my life outside. But that didn't last, either. Free said that..." His voice threatened to crack, but he gulped air and continued. "Before he

died, Free said that the time we spent together was good. I agree with him, ineloquent as he may have been. I became close to you all. And I had nothing to do with that at first. Do you understand? You go on about how I've changed the Shishigumi, but the animals I grew to care for were there all along.

"I won't forget the cowardice and brutality that drove you to abduct my classmate. Those qualities still remain in you, just as my weakness remains in me. But through you, I gained an understanding of other creatures' lives that I would never have found otherwise. Under all the grime and bloodshed of this place, I found so much to be cherished. I was inspired by your passion. Humbled by your devotion. And the time has come to make myself worthy of it."

Louis took his cane and pushed himself to his feet. The shadow of his antlers was printed on the back wall and stretched across the ceiling, a thorned crown that enfolded the lions like grasping hands.

"What happens tonight will not be the end of us," he said. "It will be our finest hour. My previous departures from your ranks were far too abrupt, but not this time. The black market is my birthplace, your home, and these interlopers have desecrated it. A reckoning is due. The Butchers won't know what hit them. They'll see you for the beasts that you truly are, and I will at last show you the full measure of the animal I am. My gratitude...and my fury." His cane thumped the floor. "Are you with me?"

The lions remained kneeling and still, and at first Louis was afraid that he'd gotten it wrong – said too much, or not enough in the right places. Then Sabu's palm came down on his table crisp as a gunshot, and he got to his feet. The other lions all followed. As one, they turned to Louis, and bowed.

The Shishigumi chorused, "*Our lives for you, boss!*"

* * *

For much of today the black market's shell had been frozen still, save for the raindrops running down its walls and sluicing through its gutters like parasitic insects. But as dusk fell, there was new movement, a cluster of shadows marching down the widest roads. To the sharpest-eared eavesdroppers, their footsteps' syncopation was uneven, chaotic, a drumroll of steady shoeheels, one of them off-tempo and faintly metallic. It was a procession that wanted to be heard, a weak new pulse on the streets, and when the black markets' residents peered outside at who was responsible for this commotion, they felt a stab of desperate hope even as their mouths began to water.

Louis walked on, eyes ahead, back straight. He timed his breaths in sync with his cane, nostrils flaring every time it hit the pavement. Miguel spoke directions into his ear at every crossroads and he followed them without question or hesitation. His herbivore's blood was screaming at him, every one of his instincts rasped raw. His kind were meant to run from danger, not stride boldly towards it. But the Shishigumi's presence kept him pushing forward.

Through the mists emerged a squat blank gray building that looked as though it had been carved from the fog itself. The glass façade was long-smashed, covered with plastic and cardboard. All the buildings around here were similarly gutted, doorframes yawning open,

windows shot out and either hastily boarded over or left to stare blind. Sabu pulled back the slide on his pistol. Jimma's lips moved in wordless prayer. Hino pulled a small pendant from his jacket pocket, kissed it, and tucked it back in. But Louis just kept going, his stride unbroken.

Inside. Through that false foyer with its ravaged linoleum, discolored where the front counter had been ripped out long ago. Behind the steel door that led to the Butchers' center of operations, where they'd sat at their phones and directed the market's circulation of flesh. Now it was in shambles, the phones tossed into a corner with their receivers hanging loose like broken necks, the desks all askew. A group of Butchers, grim-faced and overcoat-clad even here and now, busily walked back and forth among the mess, winding up wire in their hands. This was the disassembly of their operation. They all knew what was coming. Soon, the police would arrive in a storm of vengeance for Pat's final explosive sermon to the outside world. They would see this devastation and trace it to the true hideout underground, and there, Karlov and the remaining Butchers would have their last meal.

The door creaked open. All the Butchers froze, and turned to see the intruder.

In the time it had taken Louis to enter that threshold, he had undergone a startling transformation. Gone was that stoic face, that stiff-backed posture. He hunched on his cane as if he was still carrying Free's corpse on his back, his lips curled in gnashing hate. His shoeheels squeaked in the sudden silence as he struggled towards them, his bad knee buckling. For the Butchers, indoctrinated to savor the pain of others, it was a lovely sight. Several of them actually grinned at it – at this herbivore, who'd been the scion of both the underworld and high society, reduced to this pathetic scrap, this act of futile revenge. Louis started to reach beneath his coat and they all followed suit, ready to outdraw him.

Louis' hand brushed the butt of his gun. In his mind, he finished counting backwards from ten.

He threw his cane aside and dropped to the floor.

Miguel kicked the door open and it slammed into the adjoining wall hard enough to bury its handle in the cinderblock but the thunder of his arrival was drowned by greater thunder still, the lion carrying a storm in his hands; Gouhin's oft-maligned machine gun roared as Miguel swept it back and forth across the room's expanse, filling the air with lead, and most of the Butchers died before they ever registered his arrival. They reeled back with pinwheeling arms like they'd been caught in a strong wind, and their coats billowed from exit wounds as they struck the ground blank-eyed and twitching. One Butcher, a caiman built like a small tank who'd nevertheless been missed by the first pass of Miguel's assault, managed to wrestle his gun from his holster, but Louis' own pistol cracked and the Butcher clapped his hands over the new hole in his throat moments before a fresh hail of bullets tore him apart.

Then it was over, and there was only the ozone tang of cordite, the iron and salt of blood, and Louis' ringing ears. He got to his feet, dusted himself off. Miguel exhaled and lowered the gun, its barrel still encased in a distortion of heat-haze.

"Jimma was right," Miguel said. "Hell of a kick on this thing."

“You handled it well,” Louis said, maybe a little louder than he’d intended. “How many?”

Miguel panned the room. The walls were cratered with fresh bullet-holes, a fine dusting of vaporized concrete dancing in the fluorescents’ light. He counted up the bloody bodies and noticed one still moving, an alpine goat – herbivorous, that was odd – with thick clots of blood dripping in his beard, reaching for his fallen gun. Miguel casually drew his sidearm and shot him twice.

“Eleven,” he said. “No way that was all of them.”

“The rest of them have to be underground somehow. It’s the only way they could have moved through the city unhindered in such large numbers. I imagine we’ll find the entrance in the back halls of this place.” Louis grabbed his cane again and carefully moved to the side of the room. “Make sure we don’t get any surprise visitors.”

“What’s the plan now? Still got some ammo left for the big gun.”

“We have the others keeping watch. The best thing is for us to...”

Louis stopped. They both looked to the doorway. From outside came a new commotion – a flurry of gunshots, shouted curses in familiar voices. A moment later the rest of the Shishigumi stampeded in, Jimma bleeding from the shoulder, Dope firing frantically back as he dove to the floor; more bullets were zipping in and Louis heard a metallic *ping* as they struck the discarded tables just before Hino gripped the door and slammed it shut again. The Shishigumi spread out, gasping, manes all awry.

Louis approached Jimma. “What the hell happened?! Are you okay?”

“Just grazed, don’t worry.” He threw off his suit jacket; the wound beneath was light but had stained his shirtsleeve red halfway down to the elbow. “Shit, they were *everywhere*.”

“They came outta all the boarded-up buildings around this place,” said Dope. “It’s like they were waiting for us! Did someone tip them off?”

Louis shook his head. “If that were the case then we never would have made it this far. Look around. They’ve been covering their tracks around here. Who wants to bet that they somehow had secondary entrances leading to their hideout in those buildings too, just in case? I wager that you just met the remaining cleanup crew.”

“So you think they were-” Miguel began, and then another gunshot sounded, making them all jump. They looked to Sabu, who had his pistol out, and then to the back corridor, where, quite a long ways away, a sandy-furred dhole was slumped against the back wall beneath a splash of his own brains. Sabu holstered his gun and gestured for Miguel to continue.

“As I was saying,” Miguel sighed, “you think they were checking the exits or something?”

“Either that or sealing them up, so when the police finally came, they’d be herded down a single path. They must have seen us coming down the street and hoped to catch us between their forces in here and the ones outside.”

“Good for us your plan worked, then.”

“We’re still in a bad spot,” said Hino. He’d retreated to the pile of discarded phones. “They’re not great shots but they’ve got us outnumbered at least three to one. Saw a few of them lugging more of those damned explosives, too. They’re probably planning to blow open the front of this place and hit us all at once.”

The rest of the gang, Louis included, backed away from the door, all their minds filled with visions of impaling shrapnel. Agata stopped at the tables, squinting hard at the dents left by the Butchers’ bullets.

“Nothing for it,” said Louis. “We push further inside. All of us.”

Miguel shook his head. “Not a great idea. Quarters are too tight and we’d just get pinched between the ones coming from outside and anyone else headed our way.”

“Plus they’ve probably raised the alarm,” Jimma said, reloading. “We’ll cover you, boss. Get that bastard Karlov before he runs away.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Louis snapped. “It’ll be a damn shooting gallery in here! I’m not going to use you as meat shields just so I can-”

Agata drew his pistol and fired at the table, and the sudden noise made all of them flinch again. Sabu glared; Hino looked ready to smack him senseless.

“Kid, do you mind?” he growled. “Try pointing that thing in the other direction!”

“Hold on, everyone. Look.” Agata pointed at the table, which was dented from his shot but still intact. “They’re bulletproof. The Butchers must’ve had them made special so they could take cover behind them in case someone busted into the place. Like, uh, we just did.”

Miguel strode over and peered close, and then made a low, impressed whistle. The other lions all got the picture; they went for the tables, raising them up on their narrow ends, slamming them together to form a barricade. Agata talked as he worked, a confident caffeinated patter that struck a bewildered Louis as totally unlike his usual hesitant speech:

“We’ll take cover behind these and hold off the Butchers here! Boss, you wanna bring down Karlov yourself, right? Head into the back with Sabu and track him down. Are you okay with that, Sabu?” Agata asked, and the mohawked lion popped a thumbs-up. “He’s the best shot of all of us by far, he’ll be more than enough in those tight spaces. Now hurry!” The last table rose up. “They’re probably gonna be here any minute!”

The Shishigumi braced themselves against their makeshift barriers. Louis licked his lips, tried to find something else inspirational he could say. He thought of the black bricks wired outside, counting down. The lions turned to him and wondered if this would be the last time they saw each other’s faces. The finality of all this had become too real.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Sabu gestured down the hall with his gun.

“Don’t worry about us,” Agata said. “We’ll see each other again.”

“Good luck,” was all Louis could muster in response, and then they were gone.

Sabu took the lead into the twisting sterility of the back hallways, the fluorescents buzzing like flies on carrion. Somewhere in his overheated brain Louis thought that a laundry shouldn't have need of this much back space; maybe the building had served another purpose even before it had been a legitimate business, different structures knotting around each other like tree roots. That was the architecture of the black market – endlessly adaptable, perversely alive.

His ears perked and swiveled but he detected no signs of life beyond the two of them. But as they approached a corner, Sabu held out his hand again, making Louis halt. The lion pressed his back to the wall, readied his pistol. Though Louis' hearing should have been far sharper than Sabu's, he only picked up the sound in that moment. Multiple heartbeats, light and faint as dragonfly wings.

Sabu shut his eyes. The kerchief over his mouth fluttered as he breathed deep. Then he whipped around the corner with gun out and it fired with firecracker quickness – six shots, a thoughtful pause, and then a final seventh shot. He blew smoke off the barrel, loaded a fresh magazine, and motioned for Louis to follow. Louis' jaw hung open. There were two fresh bullet-holes in the wall behind Sabu but the lion hadn't even appeared to notice them.

Four Butchers down the hall, all of them stone-dead. And yet more herbivores, as well – two of them were impalas, one down with a shot to the head and another to the throat. Louis prodded them experimentally with his cane, in case those glassy-eyed heads were some kind of elaborate mask. He remembered Legosi's recounting of his conversation with Pat, his iconoclastic preaching about equality in sadism. It seemed the Butchers really did allow all kinds to join.

Sabu was looking at something else. Louis followed his gaze and saw a pair of elevator doors near where the body had fallen. They looked out of place with the rest of the hall, their chromed surface not absorbing quite as much of the sullen decrepitude that had pitted the cinderblock. He hit the call button and it dinged open at once; he and Sabu ducked away from the doors in case anyone was waiting inside, but it was empty. The lights inside shone hard and bright as an operating theater's.

“This must be the way down,” Louis said, and Sabu nodded. They stepped in and saw only two buttons. His finger hovered near the lower one and then there was a distant *boom* that rattled the building like a sudden quake, followed by a rolling thunder of gunfire from the foyer. He grit his teeth and stabbed his finger against the button and it lit and bore them downward.

The trip took far too long. The elevator's hum quickly drowned out the gunshots overhead and set up a nauseous resonance inside Louis' skull. Unbeknownst to him, numerous animals had stood in this same position on the way to their deaths, Renne of the Inarigumi included, and all of them had been struck with the same vision – this fathomless vertical tunnel driven like a nail into the earth.

He stepped up to the door but Sabu grabbed him by the coat and flung him back, and as Louis started to protest, the lion punched his own chest, so that he could hear the thud of Kevlar

underneath. Sabu stood between Louis and the elevator's waiting doors, arms up as if in surrender. Louis' eyes widened.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

Sabu didn't answer, didn't turn. But he was grinning wide enough for his fangs to glint around his kerchief. Louis dropped his cane and got out his gun.

"Have it your way," he said. "Better hope they aim center-mass."

The doors dinged and the shooting started before they opened all the way. A trifecta of Butchers was waiting and Sabu's body jerked and jumped like a marionette as they unloaded on him, but Louis was there, crouched low with a murderer's grip on his own gun; its muzzle-flash winked at the Butchers as Sabu slumped back and they all went down at once, Louis slamming the trigger in a grit-toothed frenzy, catching two of their assailants in the knee and another in the stomach and throat and they went down screaming and writhing and Louis fired again and again until they finally were still. Then there was just the two of them alone in that increasingly-familiar bouquet of blood and gunsmoke, Sabu sitting against the elevator wall, the front of his suit shredded. The bullets glinted in the vest beneath like decorative beads. His breathing was a wet, rattling wheeze, and it was the closest Louis had ever come to hearing his voice.

He knelt beside Sabu. "You alright?"

Sabu gave a trembling thumbs-up and forced himself to his feet. He gingerly touched his chest and sharply hissed air. Louis was no expert in ballistics, but he figured the lion must have gotten a few cracked ribs at the very least.

"Don't rush into things. If they had any more bodies to spare then the ambush would have been bigger. There can't be many left down here besides Karlov himself." He grabbed his cane. "I'll take the lead."

Sabu tried to pull him back but was too slow this time. Louis lurched out of the elevator, cast a distasteful eye over the results of his sloppy shooting. Then he froze stiff. Sabu tilted his head in confusion at the way the deer's face suddenly warped.

Lying at his feet in a growing pool of blood was a panther whom Louis recognized. He'd last seen this beast's face behind the barrel of a gun, just after he'd shot Free in the back. The panther's face was blank as before but he was still alive, eyes sparkling. He looked pleased to see Louis standing there.

Louis raised his pistol. "Where's Karlov?"

The panther said nothing. Louis shot him in the knee and he jerked and grimaced but still made no sound, so Louis then raised his good foot and stomped down hard on the wound. That got a scream out of him, high and thin like a teakettle.

"It was a simple question," Louis said, grinding in his heel. "Should I ask louder?"

The panther grinned with bloody fangs. “He’s close. He’s waiting. We were always-”

Louis shot him in the head and he jerked and was still. He looked to Sabu, who’d been watching from the elevator doorway, hand still over his chest like he was swearing an oath. What could be seen of the lion’s expression was now slightly concerned.

“It’s fine,” said Louis. “Come on.”

Like the building above, the halls down here were as spartan as those of a hospital, but everything bore a faint patina of deep age and the ceilings seemed much closer. Maybe that was just an optical illusion, the imagined weight of all this earth pressing down on them. As Louis and Sabu limped away from the bodies, both their noses wrinkled. The smell down here was different too, and not in a good way. Topside it had been nothing but the dry whiff of dust and old stone, but something vile wormed its way through the air here, cloying-sweet, acid-sour, invasive as fingers pushing into the brain.

They turned the corner and found its source.

Flesh.

The sides of the hallways beyond were crammed with meat, a swamp of putrefying offal that choked the bunker with its stench. A rolling spectrum of earthy colors, washed-out reds and grays and green where moss had furred the surface. Slicks of shimmering grease. Runnels of pale fat like candle-wax. Some places it was barely half an inch high and in others it came up almost to Louis’ knee, and it all emitted a thin trickle of ooze that seemed to aspirate in the relentless light. In places handprints could be seen in the soft.

As Louis tried not to vomit he thought that this couldn’t have possibly been laid down in the time since they had invaded. This must have been where the Butchers had intended to make their final stand against the city’s authorities. Force them underground through a single route, pick off as many possible on the way, and then stalk the rest through these buried halls turned intestinal by all this asphyxiating decay. They would all lie down to join the rest of the black market’s food. Dead meat, one and all.

Sabu was having a harder time coping than he was. He was bent down, drool spotting his kerchief, but gagging could be heard deep in his throat. His carnivorous instincts were tantalized by the meat but the sheer rot on display kept butting heads with his hunger.

“I hope I don’t look too appetizing right now,” Louis said. Sabu gave him a long-suffering look. “Cover me for a second, will you?”

Sabu nodded and readied his gun again; its weight seemed to alleviate his symptoms. Louis shrugged off his coat and suit jacket and then pulled off his tie, leaving them in a heap away from the rot. He then set his cane down on the pile and unholstered his own pistol.

“They’ll just be a hindrance if we’re ambushed,” he said to Sabu’s quizzical glance. “Come on. Let me know if the smell becomes unbearable.”

They set off, into the reeking depths.

Karlov the Doberman. Head of the Fifth Family, the city's wandering ghoul, and Pat's most devoted acolyte. So seldom seen that he'd practically dissolved into the realm of superstition. As he walked, Louis tried to recall everything he'd been told about this animal and came up with little more than a handful of rumor. The only one who'd contacted him regularly outside his own macabre cadre had been peeled down to bare muscle and mixed in with the pulped flesh surrounding them now. He had to rely on common knowledge. Dogs varied wildly in physique, and while he hadn't gotten a good look at Karlov during their encounter yesterday, Dobermans were said to be nearly as strong as proper wolves; he just hoped that "proper" wolves didn't include juggernauts like Legosi. But it was a fact that he'd spent years patiently stalking the black market without a single error, and the Butchers' final remnant was down here, with them both.

Where was he hiding, Louis wondered. Behind one of these scarred and anonymous doors, each with their own ominous smell to join the sickening potpourri of the halls? Pacing the corridors with the two of them, camera at the ready? Scurrying above the ceiling tiles like some monstrous rat? Louis' ears swiveled until the cartilage ached but heard no heartbeat, just the ragged rasp of Sabu's breathing.

"How old is this meat, do you think?" It wasn't the best idea to talk but the stress was wearing at him. "Two, three weeks?"

Sabu shrugged. It was understandable that he wasn't sure; meat generally didn't get to sit out that long before someone devoured it.

"They must have more recent cuts stored somewhere down here. We need to think about replenishing the black market when all this is over."

Sabu indicated that this was probably the case.

"Just food for thought. No pun intended." Sabu rolled his eyes, and Louis snorted. "At least you're a good listener."

The door beside him burst open and smashed into Louis' shoulder and he cried out and staggered back into the rot so that it burst under his heel and released a torrent of vomitous gases and he felt the oil of its decomposition seeping into his shoes as out from the darkness strode Karlov, Karlov naked from the waist up, muzzle bare and chest bare and with his camera swinging from a strap around his neck like a cannibal's fetish, the tryphobic nightmare of his flesh gleaming wet in the overhead lights; Sabu swung up his gun but Karlov turned on his heel and backhanded the barrel so the shot pinged harmlessly off the wall and the dog's own hand swung up and the air cracked and Sabu howled in pain as he dropped his gun and grabbed his arm, the first time his voice had been heard clearly in years, but it was cut short as Karlov shot him three more times in the chest and he fall back winded and grimacing into the marsh of meat. Karlov loomed over him and tilted his head as the sight of those rounds jammed in Sabu's bulletproof vest and hummed tunelessly as he raised the gun again. Louis had recovered and taken aim but all he saw from the back was a mass of holestudded skin like it was lined with puckered lamprey mouths and the sight and the smell and his weak and sweat-soaked hands caused his shots to go wild; he fired twice and only succeeded in taking a chunk out of Karlov's ear and when he pulled the trigger a fourth time it only emitted a dry *click*. Karlov turned. He smiled.

Louis tried to run but Karlov's hand snaked out and seized him by the throat. Karlov cast his gun aside and turned back to Sabu, feebly reaching for his own weapon, and he raised his camera up and snapped a quick picture and then kicked Sabu in the jaw; the lion's head snapped back, his kerchief blood-spattered, and he fell insensate into the meat. Then Karlov set off, dragging Louis behind him like a ragdoll. Louis tried to cry out but he couldn't get air and his kicking scrabbling legs couldn't find purchase on the greasy tiles. The shoe slipped off his prosthetic leg and the bent metal foot skidded and screeched as Karlov marched briskly down the halls. He stopped before another door and kicked it open and hurled Louis into the sumptuous office on the other side and he stepped in after him, slammed it shut, drew its many locks and deadbolts closed.

When he turned back, Louis was standing there in the office's center with knife drawn. He couldn't hold still; his fake foot was unable to balance on the thick and arterial-colored carpet. Karlov looked at the knife, looked back at Louis, then raised his camera. Louis winced in the sudden flash.

"So nice," Karlov said. "So nice."

He paced around the room, his chewed fingers brushing the furniture – the sleek desk in the corner, the bookshelf across from the doorway, the bureau, the photo frames holding their bland landscapes so unlike the accumulation of brutality that rested in his camera's film. He circled Louis like a shark, his camera firing off further bursts as he talked.

"This was supposed to be scene of our final departure. The remnants of our organization, taking our last stand against that broken city's futile revenge. It was going to be so beautiful. You've spoiled it, haven't you?" He rotated the camera's lens and it clattered like a giant beetle. "But this, too, has value. At last we can see each other plainly."

Louis kept his knife at the ready. "You're disgusting."

"Mm. There's quite a story behind this pelt of mine. Free found it entertaining, at least." The camera flashed, swallowing Louis' sudden expression of rage. "True, it's left me rather unattractive. And what of you? Prince of the black market. I can hardly think of anything more repulsive."

His slow orbit around Louis was growing tighter. The knifehandle sheened with sweat. Under the scarring, Karlov was well-muscled. He would barely feel a cut from this blade.

"We can't escape what we are," Karlov said. "Can't change it. Can't fight it. So when I observed you, a scrap of upjumped meat who would have barely sufficed for a single delivery by my couriers, leading a group of carnivores, encroaching upon the carnivore's *world*...it made me feel quite unwell." The camera flashed. "You are a wrong thing, little prince. Everything about your sorry reign was unnatural. But, inevitably, the proper way of things asserted itself." Flash. "This city's true ruler bequeathed it to me. It's my abattoir. Tonight I'll reclaim it from you once and for all." He was almost in arm's reach now. "It's been far too long since I've eaten live prey."

Louis smirked. "So you didn't know, either."

Karlov's pacing paused; he stopped between Louis and the door. Louis took a shaky step back and kept talking.

"If you weren't so enthusiastic about killing your own, then you might have learned this earlier. You saw me for what I was, all right. Upjumped meat. I was livestock." Karlov's face twisted in incredulity. "Yes, that's the same expression your mongoose messenger had, right before he blew his brains out. I was a resident of this place long before any of you usurped it."

"Irrelevant," Karlov growled.

"Not at all. I've spent far too long denying both halves of my heritage. Weighing one against the other. But it's time I claimed both. This city is *mine*, from its darkest pits to its highest towers, and on its behalf, I'm here to collect what's owed." He pointed the knife at Karlov. "The Shishigumi are alive and well, and the Butchers are just so much dead, *fresh* meat. So worry not, Karlov. You and your subordinates will serve us all."

He'd expected retaliation, or at least another snarled rebuke. But Karlov just stood there like he'd come unplugged, arms limp, jaw hanging. After a few seconds, a noise emerged from deep inside him, a choked and glottal staccato that made his body twitch and jump like the sound was some coiled parasite fighting its way out of his guts. It heightened, splintered, and when Louis finally realized that the dog was laughing, Karlov reached up and sank his claws into his chest and dragged. Flesh tore and blood welled. His face was in ecstasy. As if he expected to find divinity pulling apart the worm-chewed tabernacle of himself.

"Oh, what a wretched creature I am," he said. "This breeding. This programming. Even after all this, any attempt to feel such hate is like taking a constipated shit. Ha ha. Ah ha ha." He held up his bloody and dripping palms. "I could never manage it. Not like *him*. But it's all right. We're all the same flesh in the end. Endlessly digesting."

Louis' face remained set but his heart was pounding, certainly loud enough for Karlov to hear. He listened for any sign of life in the hall outside, but no one seemed to be coming. Karlov's body spasmed. His lips dripped with drool.

"I'd resigned myself to death down here. A mere formality, after everything else. But no. I have new purpose. It's time to eat. I'll start with your foot and work my way up. I'll savor every screaming bite. You can die knowing that I'll disappear without your lions ever finding me, and that they themselves will die in the storm Pat has raised. And your suffering, your failure, will persist in me. I'll live on for both of us. I will turn this body into a cradle for your misery, little prince. I'll never let you rest."

Louis hunched low. His good foot ground into the carpet. "Come at me."

Karlov didn't. He just spread his arms, the teeth in his mangled snout glittering. Inviting him.

Louis threw the knife aside and sprang at him with antlers out. Even with his deprived physique and one missing leg, his muscles were made to run, and he lunged at Karlov fast enough to blur. The ornate crown of his antlers turned him into a razor-tipped torpedo, aimed straight for the Doberman's heart-

-and then Karlov snatched him out of the air by one antler and lifted him up, high enough for their noses to touch, for Louis' toes to almost leave the ground. Karlov's eyes and mouth were all lusterless holes.

"Good to see you resort to your instincts," Karlov said. "Nothing but prey. And I am so hungry."

Louis wrenched his head to the side and the antler snapped off in Karlov's hand.

It came off clean at the base and Karlov's jaw unhinged in shock; he stared dumbfounded at the suddenly disembodied antler and noticed the small clips that had held the prosthetic in place just before he felt a tugging sensation on his neck. Then he looked and saw Louis, lying on his back with Karlov's upheld camera trailing its broken strap, and Louis hit the shutter and the flash struck Karlov's wide eyes like a gout of acid. He howled and dropped the antler and covered his face and Louis cast aside the camera and kicked upward with his good foot, smashing it into Karlov's groin, and the howl turned into a deflated creak. But Karlov stayed on his feet, he rallied as Louis' fingers went to the release catch on his prosthetic leg, and with a guttural roar the dog jumped forward with his mouth open wide – and something cold and hard slipped between his jaws and past his tongue and mashed against the back of his throat, forcing its way down, down.

Louis had risen again and rammed his false leg foot-first into Karlov's open mouth with all the strength he had, and weak though he was, the strength of a cornered herbivore was still enough to put Karlov on the balls of his feet and send him toppling. He hit the ground on his back, Louis on top of him, leaning on the leg, forcing it down one millimeter at a time.

"You want to eat me?" Louis said. "Go on, then. *Eat.*"

Karlov bucked and kicked and made sounds muffled by the knot of steel and resin locking his jaws open; his flailing hands grabbed Louis' other antler and pulled and as it too snapped off he shrieked in cheated fury, the fake cracking in his grip. Louis didn't let go, didn't let up, didn't change his wide-eyed and tranquil expression even as Karlov's claw caught his face and ripped it open diagonal from hairline to jawbone; blood from the wound pattered and pooled into Karlov's scars.

"I said *eat it!*" Louis screamed, and in response Karlov's jaw made a wet *crack* as the cartilage broke. "*Choke on it, you insane piece of shit!*"

Karlov's whole body jackknifed and he at last flung Louis off, the leg lost in him almost halfway down, distending his throat so it was almost barrel-shaped. Louis went sprawling on the carpet and watched Karlov spasm and flail, and then his eyes snapped in Louis' direction and his movement ceased. He rolled onto his belly. He started to crawl.

Louis' knees had gone to jelly. He desperately pushed himself back against the carpet but Karlov kept coming at him, wouldn't *die* even though his respiration rattled like a broken fan-blade and his eyes were popped and filmed with rheum; he sank his claws into the rug and pulled himself forward relentlessly, and Louis felt his shoulderblades hit the desk in the room's corner. He was trapped. And then the Doberman was upon him.

Karlov's distended face creased in triumph as he fell atop Louis. His hairless pelt radiated fever-heat and the blank reek of an infected wound; his hands caressed the deer's throat, ready to pull open his artery. But as he stared into Louis' wide, dark eyes, a change came over him. The skin around his own eyes collapsed and sagged. In that final moment, as the two of them faced each other, Karlov looked close to tears.

Then, with a weak sigh, he fell to the side. His throat bobbed, still trying to swallow, and then went still.

Louis was left sitting stiff, watching the empty space where Karlov had just been. He tasted blood from the gash on his face; every muscle was aflame. And as the adrenaline ebbed, he noticed a new and most unwelcome pain. In the stump of his chewed leg, a bright lance of agony that went up its core, searching for his heart.

He was tired.

He didn't know how long he stayed like that. No way of marking time down here, everything frozen in padded silence. But a sudden noise jerked him out of his stupor. Someone was thumping the door.

"Boss! Louis, you in there?!"

"I can smell him. There's blood, but not a lot...boss, please say something!"

"We gotta get this thing open somehow. Maybe go see if we can find more of those bombs?"

"Oh, sure, just go ahead and start looking. It's not like we don't know how to rig explosives, dumbass!"

"Have to do everything myself around here," Louis muttered.

He crawled to the wall and stood and leaned against it, hopping along it to the door. All the voices went silent when he drew back the first deadbolt. His palms were slick with blood and he almost fell over when he turned the handle, but he finally got it open and regarded them all.

They were all there. All alive. Agata's left eye was shut and covered in blood; Miguel was being propped up by Dope; Hino's muzzle was soaked in blood but the lack of injuries suggested most of it wasn't his. Agata was also bearing up a lion, briefly unfamiliar, and then Louis realized it was Sabu without his kerchief. He dimly observed how old Sabu looked without that thing; the fur around his chin was flecked salt-and-pepper.

"Don't just stand there gawking," he croaked. "We're not finished yet."

He limped away as the lions stepped into the office like pilgrims entering a cathedral. There was a wave of reverent curses as they saw Karlov in the corner. Jimma reached out to Louis and touched his shoulder, but Louis waved him off.

"Later," he said. "Get my antlers and my leg. Don't want to leave any more evidence than necessary. My cane and clothes are back there somewhere too, can't forget them." He

propped himself against the bookshelf. “We’ll see to everyone’s injuries first and then come back. The black market needs to be fed and we’ve got plenty of meat now. Have to make use of it somehow. We can’t waste it. We can’t-”

He bent over and puked up his lunch in a glut of colorless fluid. The lions cried his name as he scrambled for purchase on the bookshelf but he slipped and fell; the shelf swung away on its hinge, revealing the doorway beneath, but Louis didn’t notice. The pain in his missing leg was a white-hot augur, and much too familiar.

The world around him went gray. The shades of the Shishigumi clustered over him. He wanted to wave them off, tell them to get going, there was still so much to do. But as the soft dark rose up and encased him, only one thought remained:

What’s happened to you, Legosi?

You're a Hideous Thing Inside

The skeletal shadows which loomed over the Dokugumi's construction yard sheened wet like towers of mottled crystal. The rainfall drenching them had only just begun to attain the vigor that would soon hammer down on the rest of the city. Legosi's fur drooped with water, his sweater clinging close to his pelt where it hadn't already been clawed open. Past the unsalvageable garment, he wasn't terribly injured – a few scratches on his arms, a slight ache in one wrist. Half a dozen lizards lay scattered around him like dropped rags. The ones who were still conscious swarmed around him in cautious orbits.

This fight wasn't going as well as they'd hoped.

Whenever the Four Families had clashed in the past, they'd all brought something different to the table. The Shishigumi cornered the market on brute force, the Madaragumi had their blades, and the Inarigumi weren't above simply shooting somebody in case Renne's plotting didn't sabotage her opponents in advance. But in terms of sheer martial might, the Dokugumi had unquestionably been as fearsome as the other three Families combined. Their connections with the Damned 44th always gave them an edge when it came to weapons, but their hand-to-hand combat skills were nothing to be scoffed at either. Even if one discounted the lizards' venom – one bite and the battle was effectively over – Agrippa had passed down close-quarters combat training from recruit to recruit for decades, nothing special but far more sophisticated than the clumsy brawling most of the other thugs around here employed. Legosi's own fighting skills weren't much better than the average; his attacks were flailing and unfocused, and while his reflexes were decent, he had poor awareness of his vulnerable spots. But he was immune to their bite, and they were learning fast that their skill and training only meant so much against the wolf's ludicrous strength.

The first lizard had learned that a direct blow from Legosi was like a shotgun loaded full of rock-salt. The second had learned that their claws couldn't carve deep enough to make him flinch. The third came to understand that submission holds did little against someone who could break your grip with a flex. And the fourth, fifth, and sixth had attacked him all at once, only to realize that Legosi was capable of using one assailant as a blunt instrument against the other two.

All of these lessons had taken place in the span of perhaps a minute. Legosi had barely moved from his original position; he was in that same pose, fists up, eyes narrowed, the soles of his shoes scraping here and there on the wettened asphalt. The more observant lizards realized that he was conserving his energy. Treating them as a mere appetizer for his showdown with Pat. That just made them angrier.

They rushed him and seconds later they were either skidding across the ground or insensate at his feet – one who'd been seized by the wrist and tossed into another, one whose wild punch had kept them off-balance long enough for a hit from those annihilating fists. Another actually managed to get behind Legosi, preparing to unzip his throat...except Legosi then brought his arm back with the easy motion of someone working out a kink in their shoulder and his elbow brushed the lizard's head, who then fell over like an uprooted tree, glassy-eyed

and twitching. Legosi picked him up one-handed and tossed him back to his fellows, and then resumed his old stance.

Zeke and Agrippa were standing further away from the melee, transfixed. Zeke had scarcely blinked as he watched Legosi fight, but with a certain amount of trepidation he finally glanced at Agrippa to see how the boss was taking this. The old lizard's expression was livid, but he'd lost the venom-slathered expression of blind rage he'd bore when Legosi had first insulted his pride – in fact, he almost looked thoughtful. His eyes met Zeke's, and he gave his lieutenant the smallest of nods.

Zeke cracked his neck and took off running.

From where he stood, Legosi saw the other lizards scatter like chaff and then Zeke was already upon him, claws out, bent low, his tail whipping away the raindrops in his wake. Legosi braced himself but then Zeke stopped dead just outside arm's reach and slapped his palms on the ground and cartwheeled, and his tail went up and bullwhipped Legosi across the snout with such force that its crack echoed through the yard; Legosi staggered and Zeke spun again, his tail's second revolution taking aim at the wolf's leg, meaning to topple him. It cracked against Legosi's shin and he grunted in pain but held fast and scooped up Zeke's tail like a fish in a stream. Zeke's eyes went wide as Legosi gripped, and turned, and hurled him away, and he soared into a nearby cluster of other Dokugumi. Some lizards dove out the way, some tried to break his fall, but he flipped in midair and hit the ground scrabbling and charged back at Legosi in a staccato patter; the wolf unleashed a clumsy snap kick that would have probably lifted Zeke's head off his shoulders like a bottle top, but he dove and slid, the slipstream from Legosi's foot a cold breath across his scales, and popped up behind Legosi and leapt again. He latched onto the wolf. He scaled the edifice of him, perched atop him, drove his claws into his shoulders and then reared his head back and chomped into his throat.

Legosi went stiff. Zeke's mouth was filled with the taste of his blood. But something was wrong – he'd aimed for the artery but couldn't seem to get past Legosi's pelt. The flesh beneath was tough like rawhide, too much for his jaws to work through.

"This is nostalgic," Legosi said.

Zeke made a confused noise around his mouthful of wolf fur. Legosi's voice was hoarse and strained, owing to the fangs digging into his neck, but he sounded like he was genuinely trying to make conversation.

"I did something like this when I fought the Shishigumi's boss," he said. "It feels right, to be on the receiving end. Like I'm repaying a debt." Zeke tried to dig his claws in deeper, shredding Legosi's sweater, but Legosi still wouldn't offer any reaction. "You're a lot faster than I was. But I think I had a stronger bite."

Legosi reached up and grabbed Zeke's wrists and the young lizard let out a muffled scream as the wolf's grip turned crushing. With a small "hup!" sound, Legosi whipped Zeke's arms down, tearing the rest of him out, fangs and all, and flipped him into the asphalt. He struck the ground with spine-rattling force and all his air left him in a single explosive wheeze, and Legosi carefully stepped around him, reared one leg back, and punted him the way he'd come. Zeke bent like a bowstring around Legosi's foot and the other Dokugumi watched

aghast as their lieutenant's limp body went flying, a blurred pinwheel against the darkening skies.

The sweater was beyond repair. Legosi plucked it with his thumb and forefinger and looked forlornly at the rips. Then the air cracked and a puff of wind kissed his side. He spun, growling, and then froze as a second bullet passed his head close enough to shave the tip off his fur-tuft.

Agrippa approached. In one hand was a semiautomatic like a silvery cannon. The red clawmarks on his face stood in harsh contrast to his scales.

"I think that's enough entertainment for the night," he said. "I could trim the wings off a mosquito at this range, so kindly don't get any ideas."

"You lied," Legosi growled.

Agrippa snorted. "You think I'd leave myself vulnerable after going to all this trouble? You're far too trusting, wolf. It's going to get you killed one of these days."

The reptiles who could still walk re-configured themselves around their boss. Behind him, Zeke was already getting up, albeit with considerable care and several false starts. Legosi stared him down as though he could stop the bullet nestled in the pistol's chamber by sheer force of will, and the storm intensified, the clouds all bending in for a closer look at this scene.

Agrippa lowered the gun.

"There's an old drainage canal not far from here," he said. "It empties out into another part of the sewers that eventually leads to the sea. The other tunnels can get you around this district just fine, but that tunnel is the only one that leaves the city completely. It's a labyrinth in there. The correct route is one of our great secrets – a final escape, in case the situation in the black market spiraled totally out of control. When Pat struck his accord with us, he asked for two things: our venom, and those directions. That's where he's gone. I'll take you there."

The moment he'd started speaking the Dokugumi had all looked to him, slack-jawed, their shock passing live-wire through them all. Zeke limped over to him and grabbed his coatsleeve imploringly. "Sir, what are you?"

Agrippa shook him off. "Use your damned heads. This imbecile just proved himself a match for more than ten of you. Who do you think I'd rather sacrifice, ten reptiles or a single outsider? It'll be less cramped in those damned tunnels, anyhow."

Legosi didn't answer. He wasn't sure what to say. Several of the reptiles he'd laid out had also risen and return to their boss like iron filings to a lodestone, paying him no need. The script had suddenly flipped to one where he wasn't even a player.

"Gather around, all of you," Agrippa said. "Hard to make myself heard over this storm."

He removed his greatcoat and flung it aside. One of the reptiles lunged to catch it before it could be soiled on the pavement. Zeke's infamous composure had completely evaporated; his mouth flapped open and shut uselessly as he looked around at the others, hoping one of them would speak the words he couldn't find.

Agrippa said, "I was going to make this spiel after we'd killed that idiot, but evidently plans have changed. Nevertheless. Let it be known that I never intended to bring you along on this task. I've made some grievous errors in judgement of late, but I would never become so foolish as to hold you accountable for my mistakes. Zeke here will take command in my absence. No matter how long that absence may be. Understand?"

"You can't, sir!" one of the lizards cried. "Even if you go with that wolf, you'll--"

"Do you think I'm that weak?!" Agrippa snapped, and they fell silent. "If I am, then so be it! My time was almost over anyway. These gangs have always called themselves Families, but in the Dokugumi, that word *means* something! We Komodo dragons have held fast here for decades, creating a sanctuary against a world that despises us. I've seen so many of you come and go. So many." For a moment, his voice quavered. "That wretched wolf is right. My part in this disaster can't be ignored. So I'm going to take responsibility for it. If I come back, then you'd better give me a hero's welcome. And if not, then keep this Family alive. Give it a place to flourish, come what may. I've had a long and bitter life, one that should have been full of regrets, but instead I had all of you. If you want to respect my memories, my wishes, however the hell you want to think of it, then do as you've always done and *live*."

Agrippa towered above a sea of solemn faces. He regarded each of them in turn, searching for objections, finding none. Finally he came to Zeke, who looked up at him, capillaries of rainwater coursing across his scales.

"It's too sudden," Zeke said.

Agrippa laid his hand atop Zeke's head and the younger lizard seemed to melt under his touch. They stayed like that for a long moment, and then he stepped away and wordlessly motioned for Legosi to follow. Legosi gulped as all the lizards turned towards him, and hastily bowed.

"Thank you for the fight," he said, and scampered after Agrippa, who was already swaggering towards the yard's exit. The gate swung open, swung shut, and then they were gone.

Zeke was locked in place, hands clenched. All eyes turned to him. For years this masked and mute young punk had torn up their rivals in Agrippa's name, and now whatever he did would be carved indelibly into the history of the gang. They could see his knees buckle under the weight of expectation.

Then Zeke sighed. He straightened. He stepped out of the group, toward the gate, picking up one of the fallen pistols as he went. With his other hand he removed one of the venom vials that hadn't been smashed in his fight with Legosi, uncorked it with his long tooth, poured it out. It was quickly diluted by the rain, carrying its trace all across the yard. Then he raised the pistol skyward, and pulled the trigger.

The gun held twelve rounds. Zeke waited five seconds between each shot, the muzzle-flash like a shooting star in his palm. By the fourth round, many of the Dokugumi were openly weeping. By the eighth, some of them had collapsed to their knees. And when the gun went empty, Zeke cast it aside and raised his arms and head, eyes shut, palms up, as if begging for the bullets to fall back down on him.

* * *

Legosi stopped and looked back, ears flicking. He'd heard sharper sounds underneath the storm's growing patter.

"Gunshots," he said.

Agrippa stopped. "What?"

"From where we came. It sounded like they were saluting you."

"Sentimental children," he snapped, and set off again. "That's a waste of good ammo."

Legosi had stayed several paces behind him as they walked through the neon-smeared byways; Agrippa tail was lashing with enough force to crack Legosi's knees, as if all his murderous intent had filtered down into that single appendage. But now he jogged up to Agrippa's side and stuck close to him, oblivious to the black look the old lizard gave him.

"It sounds like they respect you a lot," Legosi said.

"Surprised? That's what happens with competent leadership. It's a rarity in this place."

"So you really were working with Pat?"

Agrippa's glare turned incredulous. "You didn't *know*?"

"I just assumed," Legosi said. "I don't really know much about the Dokugumi. Louis told me he was going to fight the Butchers. That's why I came here."

Not a speck of insincerity could be found on Legosi's expression. Agrippa shook his head hard enough to knock rainwater off his glasses and kept walking, talking, low and fierce as if through a confessional.

"I had to keep a place for them," he said. "I couldn't hold them together myself for much longer. Zeke is a smart boy, they'll be in good hands with him, but there was still those other come-lately Families to worry about. Any one of them would have gladly annihilated the other three if given the chance. When I first learned about the culprit behind those bombings, I had to take the opportunity. The lions were too weak, Cruce was too weak-minded, but Renne and the foxes were relentless. If the power vacuum in this city grew any larger then I knew she'd have destroyed all her rivals within a year at most."

"You asked Pat to kill her." He said it without judgement.

“I hadn’t expected the cost to be so high. My error. Zeke argued against it hardest of all.” He stopped and cast a wistful look behind them. “All the more reason he should be my successor.”

He truly was a giant. Legosi stood just barely beneath his chin. He realized how long it had been since he’d been able to look up at another Komodo dragon like this. Memories of Gosha, the two of them living in the silent house where his mother had died. Agrippa’s face was craggier, and his spectacles and those clawmarks spoiled the image, but if Legosi mentally removed those details then he could conjure up a memory of simpler times.

“What the hell are you staring at?” Agrippa said, and Legosi jerked guiltily. “Got something to say?”

“No. It’s just you remind me of my grandpa.”

And there was the familiar expression of anyone who spoke to him for more than five minutes – a bewildered blankness as the poor listener’s brain was forced to reboot. After a few seconds he shook it off and snarled.

“You take a few blows to the head on your way here, boy?” he said, resuming his walk. Legosi fell into step beside him. Maybe ten full seconds passed before Agrippa spoke up again, quieter.

“I hear tell that some of the Butchers were laid out by an old Komodo in the city. Any relation?”

“Yes.”

“That explains a few things. I suppose he’s the one who taught you to fight.”

“No, that was Dr. Gouhin. My grandpa doesn’t really like fighting.” Legosi’s ears drooped. “I hope he doesn’t find out I came here again.”

Another bemused glance. “You are aware that you’re unlikely to survive the night, yes? And you didn’t even bother to say goodbye to him? For all your yammering about reptilian pride, you must not care for him very much.”

“Of course I care about him. He’s my grandpa,” Legosi said, with rock-ribbed conviction. “But I still didn’t tell him. Because I care about this more.”

“This?”

“Fighting. Hurting other animals.” He wrapped his arms around himself, wringing water out of his torn and sodden sweater. “No matter how much I try, I can’t stop myself from doing this. I’m sorry I said that you and Pat were the same. The truth is that I’m more like him than you are.”

He’d been staring at his feet and so he didn’t see the backhand coming. Agrippa’s knuckles cracked against the side of his head and Legosi yelped and slipped and crashed into a nearby

wall, fighting to stay upright on the rain-slick ground. Agrippa pinned him between the wall and his own wool-clad bulk, eyes burning behind his glasses.

“It’s none of my business if you want to die as stupid as you lived,” he hissed. “But if you truly believe there’s any comparison between yourself and that creature, then you’re even more witless than I thought.”

Legosi dug his back into the wall, hands clamped over his aching muzzle. Through his fingers came some muffled noise that could have been an apology.

“I’m sick to death of hearing this. Don’t you understand that this is what he does to us? Parading himself in all his ugliness, insisting that anyone less abjectly repulsive is just lying to themselves. I’ve had blood on my hands since before you *or* your grandfather were born. How many animals have you killed, hm?”

“None. But I-”

“He promised that if I followed him with any of my lizards then he’d kill them all. He said that knowing it would scare me off, and then in the next breath insisted that the two of us were no different either. After he’d cast away so many of his own lackeys just to murder everyone you knew.” Agrippa finally gave Legosi space. “I didn’t fully realize what a mistake I’d made until he did that. I’d still happily kill you myself in any other circumstances, but that kind of senseless retribution can only come from someone who lives to brutalize others. His rhetoric is just another weapon. None of us are alike. You’re no killer. And my Family is not a goddamn lie.”

Legosi lowered his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Then you can stop looking at me like that. I intend to use you as a meat shield tonight and you’re going to make it difficult.” He turned away, muttering. “Haven’t seen eyes like those since Zeke was your age.”

They had come to another disused pocket of the district similar to the one in which the Butchers had set up shop – a crater of urban decay where no lights reached, where even before the market had died there would be no smells aside from aged cement and old trash. Agrippa led Legosi to the lip of a deep groove in the earth, a sunken concrete halfpipe that could have comfortably accommodated a pair of semi-trucks side-by-side. Either end of this pipe was sealed off by a prison-cell pattern of iron grating. A rust-slicked ladder led to its interior. Unbeknownst to both of them, this was where the remains of Melon had been cast, the night after the Butchers had finished carving him up.

“This is it,” said Agrippa.

“Shouldn’t it be flooded? With this weather...”

“When it was first put in, a storm like this would’ve had the water up to your chest already. But new grates were installed everywhere, the ground shifted, and the purpose of this place was lost, little by little.” Agrippa knelt at the canal’s edge. “Time just gets away from you.”

He carefully made his way down the ladder and Legosi followed. Sure enough, the ground was still just one shallow puddle. Melon's offal hadn't been the only trash to get flung down here; garbage was piled in fetid mounds along the canal's sloped sides, and the smell of it marinating in all this filthy water was nauseating. Agrippa drew his gun and faced one end of the pipe, where the grating had been cut open enough to fit a medium-sized animal. The two of them would have to bend over quite far to fit through, and the other side was a wall of impenetrable black. Legosi's night vision couldn't pierce it, could barely see through the ground just before it, as if the shadows were leaking from that ruinous entryway.

Agrippa moved forward, gun at the ready.

"Stay behind me and stay close," he said. "Is your nose working?"

"Not very well." Legosi felt compelled to whisper. "It's all this trash."

"Better hope it clears up. I might need you as a spotter. My eyes aren't the best and who knows what sort of traps he's rigged up in there."

"More bombs?"

"Could be," Agrippa said. "There's no shortage of the damned things. That's assuming he hasn't just--"

Gunshots ripped through the night and light burst inside the tunnel's yawning throat and Agrippa spasmed, staggered, holes opening up in his sweater and running red; he took five shots to the chest and stomach and then fell back and splashed as he struck the ground. Legosi didn't even have time to cry his name; he jumped to the side, looking for cover, but another bullet blasted apart the concrete just at his toe and he stiffened up. He faced the tunnel. Squelching footsteps approached.

His milky-pink muzzle emerged first, with its snaggletrap agglomeration of gnashing fangs. The rest of him, covered as he was, did not so much appear as congeal, the shadows pulling themselves together into this slumped and nebulous shape: Pat, species unknown, species irrelevant, less any sort of animal and more a roving virus, driving himself into the meat of healthy societies and unleashing rampant violence across them like fever. His gun was out and raised, pointed at Legosi's heart, and when he stopped his advance his tongue snaked out and slurped away his ceaseless leak of drool.

"Evening," he said.

Legosi stayed quiet but his tail betrayed him – it was sticker-brush stiff even under all this water. He had the feeling this standoff wouldn't end with Pat lowering his gun. Agrippa lay motionless, in a pool of diluted blood.

"I knew this scaly shit was on the prod for me, but I hadn't expected *you*. What, did he make you an honorary member or something? His very own *lizard-mutt*. You got venom glands in that mouth of yours, lizard-mutt? The question's been naggin' at me."

“No. I don’t.” His ears perked. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but he thought he heard a heartbeat.

“Ahh, that’s a shame. I woulda killed to get that perk myself. That taste anytime I wanted it.” He sniggered and steadied his aim. “Fucking idiot. Didn’t you say that you had the hots for an herbivore? This shithole society never would’ve given a mutant like you a chance to start with. You spoiled a night I’d been looking forward to for ages, and now here you show up gift-wrapped at my feet. I’m gonna take my time with you. But as horrible as it’ll be, just remember: it’s a mercy compared to the life you’d have lived otherwise.”

Agrippa’s hand seized his gun again and his head popped up like a jack-in-the-box, blood and venom oozing between his clenched teeth; still on his back, bleeding out fast, he gripped his gun in both hands and braced it against his perforated chest and took aim and fired. Pat swore and swung his weapon back to Agrippa and the pit became deafening with the cacophony of their gunfire and a bullet caught Agrippa above the snout and exited out the back of his skull and his head whipped back and cracked against the ground, rainwater collecting in his eyesockets. But Legosi was already on the move, sprinting toward Pat with claw out, and Pat fired off another burst and Legosi felt a hot and familiar pain open up on his left side but still closed the distance, twisting Pat’s wrist as the pistol fired uselessly into the sky, and then it clicked, its magazine spent. Pat’s maw snapped and grimaced but he peered around Legosi at Agrippa’s fallen gun and grinned and elbowed him hard in the gut, and Legosi staggered back, doubled over, as Pat dashed toward the pistol; he reached for it triumphantly but then a dark shape streaked by him fast enough to ruffle the hem of his coat and Legosi hit the ground rolling, the gun disappearing under his body like a magic trick, and Pat skidded to a halt as Legosi popped back up with the gun pointed out, panting hard, the bullet-hole in his side staining his sweater a darker red.

A long silence followed. Pat stayed there with his hands up, face caught somewhere between impressed and furious. Legosi’s hands were unfamiliar with the feel of a firearm and his fingertips rubbed restlessly across it as if trying to remember its shape. Out the corner of his eye he could see Agrippa’s corpse. And something else. Someone standing casually at the edge of the canal, insubstantial as smoke.

“Not bad,” said Pat. “You’re awful zippy for such a big fella. Now what?”

Legosi neither moved nor spoke. The rain’s chatter took on a mocking edge. Pat’s grin widened.

“I’m guessing that you ain’t held a gun too often. It’s not hard. You just have to aim, exhale, and squeeze.” He took a step forward. “Be happy to give you a few pointers, if you’d like to hand it-”

The gun cracked and Pat actually jumped, arms flung up over his face as if suddenly blinded. Legosi fired again and again, missing every time, the bullets burying themselves in the concrete around and behind Pat, and when the gun finally went empty, he gave it a quick shake as if another round might tumble out, and then tossed it into a nearby garbage heap.

He said, “You’re really amazing, Pat.”

Pat lowered his arms. For the first time Legosi had seen him – perhaps for the first time in years – he appeared to be at a complete loss.

“Barely anyone even knows you exist, but you’ve already changed society so much,” Legosi said. “And I think I know why. It’s been so hard for me to figure out who I am. If I keep putting myself in danger because I want to help everyone, or just because it gives me a chance to finally bare my fangs. I still haven’t found an answer.” He mournfully regarded Agrippa’s corpse. “It must be the same for all of them, too. They keep doing horrible things, telling themselves that it’s to protect the ones they care about. Love gone rotten. And it happens over and over again, without anyone ever learning or changing. Always doubting. But that’s never been a problem for you, has it? You’ve always known exactly who you are and what you want. That’s why you’re so convincing. Why everyone listens to you.” His eyes flicked back to Pat. “Even though you’re the worst animal I’ve ever met.”

He slipped off his shoes and kicked them aside, his clawed toes flexing in the deepening puddle. He took his claw and slit his sweater down the front, bedraggled corkscrews of fur popping up through the gash.

“I can’t be like you,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll ever be that sure of myself. But I have to decide what kind of life I want to live, and every time I fight, it helps me understand myself better. So this will be the last time. I’ll stop you here, with my bare hands. I’ll put my life back on track. And I’ll understand you, too. Enough to finally tell you why you’re wrong about us.”

He gripped his sweater and pulled, and it tore away with his undershirt in one clean piece and landed in a drenched heap. Legosi flexed, the scars on his back rippling under his pelt – Bill’s clawmarks, Pat’s punctures, interruptions in his flesh like a mystic tattoo.

Pat just stood there. His head was tilted enough for rainwater to run freely off the slope of his hood, his stream of slobber on pause. His laughter started as a high and almost girlish titter that mounted into a nail-on-chalkboard cackle that made his whole body jump and shudder as if suspended on strings, and it ended as a hacking cough and a burst of spat phlegm between his feet. He wiped off his mouth, and unsnapped his raincoat. From underneath could be heard a series of clicks like a tumbling lock, as his clawed hands worked busily at what was inside there.

“Have to admit, you’re pretty remarkable yourself,” he said. “There’s no definition of a fool that you fail to satisfy. But if that’s how you want to play this, fine. Let’s bare it all.”

Pat flung off the coat.

At first Legosi couldn’t properly grasp what he saw. The coat hit the pavement with a metallic jangle, weighed down by whatever accoutrements of war Pat had lined it with, and with that sound the shape in front of him snapped into clarity and he recoiled as if struck by migraine. The raw pinkness of Pat’s muzzle continued everywhere, his scalp and bare torso and arms, shading from lobster-red to lymph-pale, a heaving burnflesh heap wrinkled with the canyons of Pat’s inscrutable age. Vaguely canine but mangled beyond any certainty, eyes pig-iron black and ears hacked down to useless flaps and arms dangling apelike at his sides, and all of dominated by those twinkling claws and teeth, the only part of him that seemed

clean. As though a hunk of raw meat had crawled off the hook and sprouted limbs with which to shove these prosthetics into itself, return it to a parody of life. It was Melon all over again, a creature that lurked and cavorted in the gaps of Legosi's comprehension, and just like Melon, Pat recognized his bewildered revulsion and it fed his malicious glee all the more.

"It's okay to be unsettled," he said. "This society's gotten into your head, too. Every animal with their own shape, and every little thing in its place. That's how their so-called harmony keeps working. But not even that was enough for them. Once upon a time, a new species was brought into the world. Long on brains but short on hate, a pack of soft and pacified little beasts to lead everyone into a happy new era. Well, I chose not to accept that. And so I laid myself down, and got to tinkering." He ran his hands over his soaking corpus. "I scoured and bleached my pelt so nothing would ever grow there again. I cut off my tail, hacked up my ears, ripped out my teeth and claws. I took the shape this lying civilization gave me and I carved and carved until, at long last, I found myself. I'm what lies beneath. I'm the common denominator. I am *you*, and you are *me*."

Legosi's claws gashed the concrete as he bent low. His snout wrinkled back like a pulled tablecloth and the harmonic of his growl vibrated all through his bones, pushing away the pain of his gunshot wound. Pat beckoned him with one claw. The least movement of his body created obscene ripples.

"Let's go. The block is waiting for you."

Legosi charged at him as if spring-loaded, a roaring dervish of fang and claw. He slashed and grabbed at where Pat had been and brushed something warm but came away with only air, skidding back the way he'd come still on all fours. He straightened up and saw Pat there as if he'd never moved at all, staring off to the side, his crocodile grin in profile. He was holding up one hand. The claws dripped red.

Only then did Legosi notice the warmth on his torso. He looked down and saw the fresh carvings in his stomach, four deep wounds in parallel, and looked back up jaw agape just in time for Pat's fist to collide with his gut.

Pat barely came up past Legosi's chest but underneath that deprived pelt was a solid mass of muscle. Legosi spewed air and spittle and rocked back and then yowled in pain as Pat reached up and sank his claws into Legosi's pectoral, digging deep, reeling him in, and Pat pulled him down and struck him with a right hook that made Legosi feel like a bomb had gone off inside his skull. He threw a hard punch back and Pat grabbed his wrist and twisted, Legosi's arm socket suddenly full of magma, and Pat yanked him in close and put his mouth to Legosi's ear.

"Hey, lizard-mutt," he whispered. "*Give me your fucking eyes.*"

His claws glimmered and Legosi instinctively flung his free arm over his vulnerable eyes but then felt another ripping pain across his torso, Pat laughing merrily at he slashed at Legosi further, and he shoved Legosi away by his twisted arm and the wolf slipped and almost fell. He looked down in mute horror at the panoply of mutilation he'd already sustained. There was so much blood. And here was Pat again, wading in.

Legosi prepared for the claws but Pat casually raised one foot and kicked down hard on Legosi's shin. He cried out again as the bone bent back and swiped at thin air, Pat already wheeling around him and tearing at his back like a scratching post, engulfing his old scars in the new; he sank his fingers into the cuts and *tugged* and Legosi screamed as he envisioned his entire pelt being lifted clean off the sinew but then Pat shoved hard and he staggered forward and dropped to his knees, Pat stabbing into him again and again in his spine and shoulders and calves like a child pinning a bug. Legosi kicked back and hit something soft and the butchering stopped for a moment and he braced himself and swung with his other leg out. Pat blocked but not fast enough, and Legosi's toe-claws scored bloody wounds on his upraised arms.

His grin still gnashed behind his guard. He backed off and circled Legosi, sprawled out in the deepening wet. The rain was an endless din now, hammering on the roofs like applause. Legosi tried to raise himself up but his muscles wouldn't cooperate.

"Now this is the good shit," Pat cackled. "I've killed more animals than I can count in more ways than I can name, but nothing beats doing 'em in with your bare hands. I've spent my life in war zones, kiddo! You really thought your sloppy-ass street fighting was gonna do shit to me? Get up! Come at me again! I'll whittle you into *kindling* before we're through. *I ain't gonna let you die easy!*"

His head still spun from Pat's last blow; his dentures felt ill-fitting. Fear seized up his heartbeat. He hadn't expected this. Pat didn't need his tricks after all.

Then he heard another voice. Crystal-clear, as if it had sidled right past all the raindrops.

"Better not give him a chance to rest, wolfy. He's strong as hell and twice as mean, but he's too old to keep this up for long. You can outlast him. Didn't you punch your way up our tower without breaking a sweat?"

There it was again – that shape at the corner of his eye, dark as jet and indistinct as smoke. A lashing tail, a raised mane.

"I'm just around for the show," it said. *"Still, ain't no reason this mouthy son of a bitch should be giving you so much trouble."*

Free? Is that you? Legosi thought hazily. *You shouldn't be here. You're dead, remember?*

"Don't act so surprised. You're the one who's supposed to be full of surprises, you crazy bastard. So quit fucking around and bare your fangs already."

Legosi shoved himself back to his feet and turned to Pat. His claws twinkled as he beckoned for Legosi to rush him again. Free was right – even when they'd met at the bar, this was how he fought. Taunting Legosi, baiting him in, and ripping him apart when he went off his guard. Conserving stamina. But Legosi's energy was bleeding out of him and down his pantlegs, the bullet wound was a persistent augur in his side, and if he dallied much longer then his reflexes wouldn't be enough to counter Pat at all.

He licked his lips, felt the contours of his dentures. Then he wiped water off his brow and charged.

This time he made no effort to attack even when Pat swiped at him again. He put up his guard and took one hit, two, the claws scything across his forearms, and Pat skittered to the side and lashed at an opening and Legosi reached out and grabbed his outstretched hand, interlacing his fingers with Pat's like a lover. His mouth opened wide, fangs shining pale. Pat sneered and prepared for the bite.

Then Legosi reached up with his free hand and stuck it in his own mouth. The sneer collapsed into a look of utter bafflement. In his moment of confusion, Pat's defenses dropped, and Legosi's hand came out and delivered an open-palm slap that whipcracked over the typhoon's cacophony.

Any onlookers, spectral or otherwise, may have been puzzled by what happened next. Legosi's blow was a clean one, and would have definitely smarted against Pat's furless pelt. But there was no reason why Pat should have reeled back shrieking and grasping at his face as if it had suddenly caught fire – or so one might think, until they noticed Legosi's puckered and sunken upper lip, and the denture embedded in Pat's face and eye.

If Pat in his flailing had scratched himself with those envenomed claws then the fight would have ended right there, but he still had enough presence of mind to pluck the denture free and throw it aside. It had left a starburst of bleeding holes across his jowly flesh and punctured his eye like a balloon; in place of that black hole there was now a red one, oozing blood and aqueous humor. The remaining eye lanced through Legosi, and little by little, Pat's pained gasping warped into another giggle, broken and jagged as shrapnel.

He said, "I'm going to rip your balls off for that, you mangy cocksucker."

No waiting this time. Pat rushed him down silent as death with claws out. One giant swipe, two, then a vicious double-handed downward swing that nicked Legosi's chest and felt like it ripped his flesh down to the ribs, and now here it came, Pat's hand rising up between Legosi's legs with fingers curled like he was holding a goblet, ready to make good on his promise. But instead of dodging Legosi stepped into the blow and drove his knee up into the underside of Pat's muzzle and his teeth slammed together with a nutcracker *clack*; he staggered, screaming curses, and Legosi stepped into his newly-blind side and slapped his palm into his fist and drove his elbow into Pat's temple with howitzer force. Pat's head lolled, the bruise already spreading on his bare scalp, and Legosi grabbed him in a rough armlock and planted his claws in Pat's forearm. The old animal realized what Legosi intended to do an instant before it started and spit denial at him, desperately tearing the wolf's side open further, but Legosi was undeterred, his claws raked Pat's flesh and hooked under his glove and with a mighty tug he pulled it off and flung it away. They parted once again, Legosi's blood coursing off him in a pink froth, Pat half-disarmed.

The hand underneath that glove was gnarled and crosshatched with scars, the fingers like those of a hard-worn doll. Pat stared at it as if he'd forgotten it had been there. Then he looked back to Legosi, his eye ablaze with corrosive hate.

"Fuck this. Fuck all of it."

He pulled at the other glove and threw it to the ground. Legosi watched it there, sad and sodden, those stitched claws gleaming pearly-white. He noticed his denture near his own foot.

“Claws. Fangs. Horns. Venom. Useless fucking decoration, all of it. I don’t need any of it!” Pat struck his chest, causing his flesh to quiver. “This is all we are in the end. I brought this city to its knees with nothing but *this!* And all the ones before it, and all the ones that’ll come after! I’m better than a mongrel fuck like you on my worst day. I don’t need any toys to kill you!”

Legosi put his denture back in his mouth. He bit down once, twice, fitting it back into shape, and then regarded Pat with something close to pity.

“Throwing away all those parts of yourself didn’t make you a better animal,” he said. “It just made you *less* of one.”

Pat cracked his knuckles. “Same fucking difference.”

The rain was becoming too much for the district to endure. The black market’s ramshackle gutters groaned under the sooty rivers coursing through them; animals living on the top floor of apartments gave up laying down containers to catch the leaks and resorted to prayer. The disused canal was regaining its old purpose. The water around the combatants’ feet had grown deep enough to slosh as they circled each other. Legosi was so raddled with cuts that his pelt seemed to slough away from the muscle. Pat’s breathing had gone ragged, shoved through lungs like rotted fruit.

This time they both charged. Rain sprayed around their steps as they clashed, a blur of snarls and flailing limbs, these broken animals stalking each other around the black market’s midden-heap in hopes of reducing each other’s bodies to yet more discarded refuse. Pat’s swings grew wilder but were no less devastating, one a rib-cracking cross that lined Legosi’s breaths with ground glass, another landing square in his kidneys and turning his knees weak; his wounded side went white-hot as Pat jammed a thumb into his bullet-hole and pulled and he headbutted Legosi as he doubled over, opening up a fresh laceration that coated his eye with blood. But Legosi was countering now, with fist and knee and claw, and even a glancing blow struck Pat like an avalanche. With every hit, he took longer to regain his wind.

Legosi advanced. Pat backed off, and his foot hit something and nearly caused him to stumble and he looked down and saw Agrippa’s corpse there, his dead face almost smug in the driving rain, and in that moment of distraction Legosi’s fist came down on his skull like a meteor. Pat swayed, his good eye rolling like a dropped marble, and he howled as Legosi sank his claws into his flesh and raised him high and slammed him back to the pavement. He sent up a geyser of rainwater on impact and barely scrambled away before Legosi punched down again, the concrete cratering around his knuckles.

Pat got back to his feet and swayed there as if inebriated. He couldn’t seem to maintain his offensive stance anymore – it faltered and wilted, and every other breath came out as an asthmatic cough. Legosi’s foot skidded back. Blood spurted from his cut arm as his muscles bulged. Then he stepped forward and followed through, his knuckles parting the raindrops en

route to Pat's face, an extinction event of a blow that would put an animal twice his size down for good.

Then Pat dodged to the side, and with an unspeakable guttural screech opened his froth-flecked jaws wide and chomped down on Legosi's arm.

Legosi's scream picked up where Pat's ended. Those unnatural teeth sawed into him, his blood burst from around Pat's lips in freshets and no amount of beating or gouging would make him let go and the pain was rapidly approaching a threshold that indicated irrevocable damage, the bite passing through his pelt and splintering the bone, and Pat whipped his neck to the side and dragged Legosi off his feet and the wolf's scream reached crescendo as his bones broke with a cascading shatter like a branch under heavy ice. Pat spit out the arm and it released a surge of agony as it flopped uselessly to the ground, pain like a hammerblow between his eyes, and he desperately turned and crawled away with this hateful bloodsoaked maniac's hysterical mirth ringing in his ears, and Pat sauntered up to his side and kicked him in the ribs and flipped him onto his back and sat upon him like a monstrous toad. He struck Legosi across the face again and again, a mad drumbeat of blows that pulped Legosi's muzzle and filled his own mouth with blood and wracked his addled brain with bursts of firework light, and then Pat's smooth and clawless hands latched onto Legosi's throat and started to squeeze.

His windpipe locked up. He scratched at Pat with his functioning hand but could hardly work up the strength to break the skin. The rain pooled in his gasping mouth as the synaptic blooms of light in his vision went photo-negative, blackness spreading over his world like dripped ink, and Pat's mouth also dripped, yawning wide, slobber spilling forth from him in a flood as he gorged himself on the spectacle of Legosi's death. He was dying. He was...

He was in his apartment, sprawled out on his mattress with the space heater's hiss coiled around him like a scarf. The rain beat harmlessly on the window outside and his fur was dry and clean. There was someone kneeling on his chest, looking down on him with that sad smile. She caressed the side of his face, and between her ears the room's sole bulb created a soft, fuzzed halo.

Haru, he thought. And then he reached up and rammed his fingers down Pat's throat.

Pat's eye popped wide and his grip released, and Legosi took a spasming breath, not much, still strangled by the bulk of the creature atop him, but enough to banish the blooms of unconsciousness from his vision. Pat's teeth tore and gnawed at Legosi's hand but it was too big for him to properly bite and Legosi kept it in even as Pat desperately throttled the forearm like a cobra. It was only when Pat finally tried to shove himself off Legosi that he curled his fingers down and yanked the hand away, and in so doing he ripped off Pat's bottom denture, along with most of his tongue.

The fangs were carried away by the flood's strengthening current as Pat staggered back, hands clapped over his mouth like a society lady who'd just heard a scandalous remark. His cheeks bulged and he bent over and spewed a massive gout of blood in which chunks of pink tongue tissue could be glimpsed like herbs in a stew. The water greedily drank it up and carried it with the rest of the refuse, into the tunnels and the dark. He watched it go. He

looked back to Legosi, who was shakily getting back to his feet, heedless to his shredded skin and shattered arm.

Pat turned and ran.

He went for his coat, which was still where he'd cast it, weighed down with whatever wicked toys he'd ferried from his workshop. But the rushing water underfoot twisted mischievously, and he slipped and went down. The side of his head splashed against the concrete, and Legosi's shadow fell upon him. The wolf dropped to his knees, and started to punch.

The first blow printed knuckle-divots in the side of Pat's head. The second caught him as he tried to rise and smashed him back to the concrete. The third tore his lips against his remaining teeth and painted them candy-red. The fourth was to erase the grin still forming on those lips even now. Legosi persisted. Legosi carried on. Legosi's broken arm dangled limp at his side and his unbroken arm was a jackhammer against this grotesque sadist's skull and he would not stop as a howling gale lashed the rain against his bleeding back like a cat o' nine tails, the rain that now brought down the wretched shacks around this flooding pit and beat down on the hollow-eyed animals clutching what few bedraggled possessions they could save from the flood, the rain that hammered barking policemen and half-drowned rats as they desperately struggled with the numerous nests of wiring that encased Pat's final vengeance on the city's rotted heart, the rain that lit up in diamond-dust sprays as several of those bombs went up and flooded the black market with their wrathful light to join the light from the city beyond and the misery it had exposed and the innumerable further miseries it threatened to usher forward, everything illuminated in the downpour, the harried police and frightened civilians and broken Beastar and the piles of Butcher dead and Legosi still would not stop and now viewed himself as if from above and thought he could see this chaotic tableau descend and converge and center itself around the two of them like water swirling down a plughole and he thought: whose body is this, whose aching fist, whose shrieking voice, whose weary bones and and threadworn skin, whose confused and divided blood, whose weak and hopeless heart, whose sick spirit that had driven its owner to destroy itself in pursuit of some justice or restitution that it couldn't explain and lashed itself to appetites it couldn't understand? Whose?

Mine.

Legosi's fist rose up.

This is me.

The final blow emitted a *crunch* like a stomped paper bag. Pat's head was now an abstract collection of gore-caked lines. Legosi pushed away from it, stood over the still and silent body that now lay there like one of the bloated trash bags lining this place. He was breathing hard as he could but he couldn't seem to get enough air. His adrenaline was ebbing, and as it did so he felt his body begin to tally its injuries. He didn't think he would survive if it finished its accounting.

He forced himself to turn away and made for the ladder, the water rushing almost ankle-deep around him. No ghosts watched as he gripped the slick rungs with his chewed and shaky hand; he made it up one step, two, and then his strength gave way and he emitted a small cry

as he fell and landed on his back. His broken arm sent up a fresh bolt of pain and water sprayed into his nose, causing him to cough. With great effort, he sat up again, lurched to the canal's sloped side, and then slumped against the heaps of crinkling trash.

Legosi felt untethered from himself. The pain was there and tremendous, but it was like it belonged to somebody else. Again that sensation of floating somewhere above. And now he saw his shadow, standing on the opposite end of the canal. The red of its eyes was so vivid in among these gloomy grays that it almost hurt to see. He waited for it to say something – an apology, a gloat – but it merely flaked away before his sight like burning paper. Soon, all that remained of it were those eyes, which faded and winked out, leaving him alone with the pattering rain.

“Is anyone there?” he croaked. “Free? Louis?”

No answer. He was growing very cold.

Legosi lay back and closed his eyes. “Haru.”

The trash around him no longer smelled like much of anything, the storm having beaten its reek out of the air. In its place, Legosi smelled something that made the stomach under his lacerated belly growl – rich spiced earth, vegetable stew simmering in its pot. He was at Haru's table again and there she was across from him, but the light was somehow wrong; no matter how he focused, he couldn't make out her face.

I'm sorry, Haru, he said, though he didn't feel his throat make the words. I messed up again. I must look awful...will you even want me like this?

The rain's beat gradually became soothing. In its touch Legosi could feel Haru's small hands enfolding his snout, Gosha's scale-plated hug, Louis' half-teasing grip, Bill's backslaps, Jack's embrace – all of them and more, this multitude of hands carrying him up, raising him ever further.

I didn't mean to worry you, everyone. Just let me rest here for a little longer, and then I'll come home. I promise, I'll see you all again soon.

Legosi receded into himself. His breath was a wave crashing on the shore and every wave came lower and slower. There was no longer the cold or the pain or the patter, just that sound, and he followed it out to sea, the quiet dark where sleep would find him at last.

There was something else.

A new noise had followed him down here. Something shouting his name. He vaguely felt himself being shaken and the darkness dissolved around him as he opened his eyes a sliver, and there looming in front of him was a broad and grit-toothed gorilla's face, close enough to make out the individual pores on his nose. It gave even Legosi's weakened heart a jolt; he stirred and groaned, and Sergeant Cromwell's features melted in relief.

“Can you hear me, kid? Blink if you can hear me!” Legosi didn't blink; he was too tired.

“Shit. Keep looking at me, okay? Your grandfather asked me to come get you. Just hang on!”

Grandpa? he tried to say, but his jaw had turned to stone. Behind Cromwell could be seen the shapes of several other officers splashing into the canal, and the sergeant looked up and barked at someone presumably standing overhead.

“Get the medics ready! We’re taking him out of this shithole ASAP!”

“Sir, there's other bodies here!” shouted another simian officer. “This one looks like Agrippa from the Dokugumi!”

“Guess those lizards weren’t full of it after all. Never thought the day would come when I’d be asking them for directions.” Cromwell patted the side of Legosi’s head. “Kid, you still with us? Don’t fall asleep, alright?”

“There’s another one, hard to make out...wait, we’ve got movement! What is that? *What the hell is that?!*”

The officer’s voice splintered and both Cromwell and Legosi turned. Legosi’s heart dropped down to his stomach.

At the end of the canal rose a pink and bloody mass like the awakened remains of a buried god – head cocked and distended and jaw twisted and askew but still alive, the infernal engine of Pat’s hate driving him along even now, his one eye lost in bruise-flesh like a rattle of boils and the blind hole of the other sweeping over a collection of terrified cops half a dozen strong, all with their revolvers raised, fighting to hold their ground amidst this relentless water.

“Hold your fire!” Cromwell roared. “We have to bring him in alive if we can! I’m assuming you’re Pat, correct? Get down on your knees with your hands on what’s left of your head!”

Pat either didn’t or couldn’t hear. He lurched to his coat and his questing hands slipped into its depths and squirmed around like parasites.

“Comply or we’ll shoot! This is your final warning!”

He pulled something out of the coat and stepped back. The collected officers saw the olive-drab sphere that Pat clutched between his palms like a present. He pulled the pin and that was it – one officer’s nerve snapped, it cascaded across the rest of them, and they opened fire all at once. Pat’s profaned body jerked and twitched as his flesh swallowed ten separate shots and yet he still didn’t fall; he stood there, a waxy silhouette against the sewer tunnel’s open mouth, and he raised the grenade up and shoved it down his gullet.

From where he lay, Legosi didn’t see Pat’s eye fog over, or the look of ecstasy on his ruined face as he fell back. He saw only one final burst of light like a camera-shutter, and then the current took him again, bearing him down to a place where no light, sound, or hunger could reach.

Embers in the Light of Dawn

Louis was carried through a broken world.

It was as though the bunker in the city's bowels had become fractured, so that the solid and real was scattered in a senseless black mass. He couldn't move or speak but was borne through those patches of intervening dark, the pain in his gnawed leg jabbing everything back into focus. He couldn't rest yet. There was still so much to be done.

He didn't know how much time he spent on Karlov's luxurious carpet before these warm arms lifted him up, or whose face this was that hovered overhead, the fluorescents' hard glow limning the strands of its mane. It looked like Agata but its features were obscured, the red patch on its face dripping warm, adding to the warmth on Louis' wound. It ferried him through the corridors of flesh and into the elevator, whose hum lulled him and cast him once again into that senseless black sea.

When he emerged again, he was in the foyer where their first strike against the Butchers had been conducted. Leonine shapes could be seen stacking sodden corpses like cordwood. He tried to call out to them but it was like the words had too far to travel between his throat and the open air; they fell to tatters around his teeth. The Agata-shape drifted in front of his vision.

"Can you hear me?" it asked, the voice like a bell under deep water.

Louis made no response that he could discern but the shape nodded and lifted him up once more, taking him away from the bodies.

"The rain's slowed down. We're taking you home."

No. Not like this. Not until it was finished.

"We can take care of things from here. I know you wanted to say goodbye, but it's better this way. If you stay in this place for too long then it'll never let you go. I don't think it's such a bad life. But you deserve more."

They stepped outside. The damp, close air made Louis shiver in these cradling arms. The rain was still coming down but not hard enough to make one's skull ache; through his bleary vision everything was in soft greys, a world chiseled from fog.

"You don't have to worry about us, Louis. We all thought we were finished and you gave us a second chance. We're going to make the most of it."

At the far end of an alley he saw them. Three more lion-shapes and all familiar – the cross-scar glowing with inner fire, the rectangular lenses filled with light, the slouched back and grinning glinting fangs. They stood there as if loitering and all of them met his eyes. The third one raised his hand and waved and turned away with the others, and they walked off into the black market's depths, the night plucking their shapes apart into inchoate mist. Louis raised

one leaden arm and held out his hand, wordlessly begging them not to go, but then the darkness returned and he did not emerge from it again.

* * *

Once again, his aching body found itself encased in clean sheets. His hands recognized the feel of linen; its touch lay on the stump of his leg. The air was crisp and antiseptic. A hospital, then. How tiresome.

He stirred and opened his eyes by degrees, wincing against the overhead lights. His father had only settled for the best – this was less of a hospital room than a sterilized penthouse, complete with flatscreen TV, modern furniture, and wall-sized picture window with a full view of the city beneath. Judging by the darkness of the sky and the stiffness in his muscles, he wagered that he'd been under for almost a full day.

Beside the bed was another deer. Louis' still-hazy mind first registered it as Oguma, once again sitting vigil so that he could lecture him upon regaining consciousness, but then he took notice of its slim shape and the smell of perfume under the antiseptic, and he woke up the rest of the way, all at once.

"There you are," said Azuki, phone in hand. She said it like he'd just returned from the men's room.

The doe was wearing a dun power suit that tastefully offset her fur color, and a small ruby pendant that rested against her neck like a droplet of blood. She'd applied the same perfume as the last time they had met, during their disastrous tryst in that hotel room. If any unpleasant memories from that day still lingered in her mind, she didn't show it.

"To answer your questions," she said briskly, "your father courteously informed me of your situation. I'll admit I was rather worried about you in the first place, what with the recent civil unrest, so I've taken full advantage of the hospital's visiting hours. I have work to do, of course, but nothing that can't be handled remotely." She pocketed the phone and gently ran her finger across Louis' forehead; only then did he realize the presence of the stitches.

"That's going to leave an awful scar."

"What happened?" Louis said. "Outside, I mean. Is everything alright?"

"Take a look for yourself. You shouldn't even have to get out of bed."

He followed her pointing finger to the window, then hoisted himself to a sitting position and peered outside. Below the hospital, the city's jewelbox spray continued uninterrupted, but the pattern of cars between the buildings' lights was sparse, chaotic. Several buildings had darkened entirely.

"There was some kind of terrorist attack," said Azuki. "Bombs went off all across uptown, and in that ghastly black-market district as well."

"The black market? What?"

“Yes, I can hardly imagine why. Blowing that place up would practically qualify as gentrification.” She returned to her phone, apparently checking her newsfeeds. “Though it seems most of those were disarmed. The police and the market’s gangs were working together, the Beastar was involved too...it’s quite a scene. For a little while there it looked as though riots were inevitable, but that appears to have been put on pause for now. No one’s come to your estate with pitchforks and torches.”

“Heaven forbid,” he said. “How’s my father reacting to all this?”

“He’s rather put out. Understandably so. According to him, you kept breaking curfew until you finally got caught in one of those bombings.” She clicked her tongue. “I never took you for someone so reckless.”

Louis stared. Azuki stared back, her bright gaze rummaging around him for secrets. They might not have been compatible, but Louis had to begrudgingly admit that Oguma had chosen well when he’d gone searching for a bride. Azuki was from old stock, her own family’s business holdings going back generations, but she was intelligent, surprisingly good-humored, and contemptuous of her nepotistic peers. If there had been a place for her kind in the black market – a Shikagumi, perhaps – he had little doubt that she’d be a fearsome rival.

“Yes, I’ve been foolish,” he said carefully. “I hope this won’t jeopardize our relationship any further.”

“Well, your male functions seem to be intact, so I have no practical complaints,” she said. “Now that you’re awake I’ll be heading back home. Visiting hours are just about over. Although,” she added, “there’s one thing I wanted to ask.”

“What is it?”

Azuki smiled. The beartrap went *click*.

“Who’s Juno?” she asked.

The reflections in an herbivore’s eyes went both ways. Louis had a splendid view of his deer-in-headlights look as Azuki stared him down.

“I assume she’s a female. It’s a fine enough name,” she said. “You kept asking for her as you stirred in your sleep. I think you even confused me for her, a couple of times. I just might get jealous.”

There was no getting out of this. Louis was too tired to come up with a story and Azuki’s amusement at his suffering would only extend so far. He sighed heavily and gripped his bedsheets, staring at the wrinkles in the fabric like a playscript in a language he couldn’t read.

“She’s a former classmate of mine,” he said. “A gray wolf. The two of us-”

“Speak up, please, I can’t hear you.”

Louis rolled his eyes. “The two of us kept in touch after I graduated. She informs me about the goings-on at my former drama club. Lingering attachments, you could say.”

“Is that all?” Azuki asked patiently.

“She kissed me, before I left school. And it was...I enjoyed it.” He didn’t look up from the bedsheets. “I thought it was just a schoolgirl’s crush at first. Maybe it still is. But during the time we’ve spent together since, the way she’s made me feel, how she’s challenged me...my mind keeps going back to it. I don’t mean this as a slight against you, Azuki. But our relationship was laid out for us from the start. Like so much else about my life. I kept straying off that path, and it hurt every time I did, but I found things worth cherishing there, too. She was one of them.” The bedsheets bunched in his fists. “I think she’s the main reason I’m still here. Still alive.”

Only then did he dare to look up at her again. Her expression had changed very little. He expected her to bite on that final statement, tease out the truth of what had landed him that hospital bed as an appetizer for the tongue-lashing to come. But instead she turned to the open doorway.

“Did you get all that?” she said.

Juno leaned in. “More or less.”

She entered the room and walked up to his Louis’ bedside. She was dressed simply, in dark jeans and a tan blouse that some fizzling corner of Louis’ stunned mind realized was the same color as his own pelt. Azuki primly crossed her legs and reclined in her seat, beaming.

“Was it everything you’d hoped for?” she said. “Rather dry, I thought.”

Juno shook her head. “I wasn’t expecting a huge declaration of love or anything. It’s not his style.”

“Yes, you have a point. I can’t say that I’m much different.”

“It was honest, though. You can tell he’s lying when he’s being all eloquent. It means he’s rehearsed it beforehand.”

“Always suspected as much.” She winked at him. “An actor to the end, hm?”

He was dead and this was hell. His body was bleeding out somewhere in the streets or Karlov’s office while his soul had been consigned to this plush hospital room, and any minute now Haru would walk in, and Oguma, and the Shishigumi and his old classmates, and they would all gather around his bed and airily discuss his shortcomings while Legosi stood in the doorway, staring, judging, silently, forever.

“I think we’re frightening him,” Azuki said. “You can take this seat, Juno. I warmed it up for you.”

Louis watched numbly as Juno took Azuki’s chair. One of those large, clawed hands enfolded his own, forcing it to relax.

“I tried to find you as soon as the news broke about the black market,” she said. “I just looked up the fanciest hospital in the area and kept asking for your name. They wanted to get

rid of me at first, but I guess someone told Azuki about me and she made them let me in.”

“She’s a determined young female. It’s refreshing,” said Azuki. “And I seldom have a chance to learn about your personal life. So we chatted a bit while we waited for you to wake up.”

“She basically made me confess my feelings for you,” Juno muttered. “Dunno how that happened.”

“She can be persuasive,” Louis said distantly.

“Yes, I thought it might be best if we cleared the air on the matter,” Azuki said. “It’s honestly a relief, after our last encounter. I thought there was something you found distasteful about me, but it turns out your weak stomach was just a symptom of your cheating heart.”

Juno looked between the two of them. “What?”

“Nothing,” said Louis. “Personal joke.”

Azuki had gotten her phone out again, smugly poking away at the screen. “In any case, this changes nothing for the time being. We both have our own lives to live, and I’ve seldom seen you behave so passionately about anything. If you truly do feel so strongly about her, I have no issue with postponing our marriage until your little experiment in carnivore-herbivore relations is concluded.”

“And what if it’s not an experiment,” Juno said, with the faintest edge in her voice. “What if this turns out to be serious?”

“Then you’ll be upsetting a large number of very wealthy and powerful animals, many of whom I dislike immensely. So that should be interesting.”

Azuki strode over, leaned down to Louis, and pecked him on the cheek. He swayed at the kiss like a branch in a strong wind.

“I’ll be off,” she said. “Assuming society doesn’t collapse in the near future, you both simply must join me for dinner one evening. The three of us, sharing a table at L’oriot... imagine the *scandal*.” She laughed brightly. “Please look after yourself, Louis. After what I’ve heard today, I have no doubt that quite a few animals care deeply about you.”

She waved and strode out the room, delicately shutting the door behind her. Juno and Louis were left staring at the spot where she’d been as if a hurricane had just blown through.

“That’s your fiancée?” Juno asked.

“That’s my fiancée.”

“She’s different than I imagined.”

“You’re not alone there. I don’t actually know her that well. Clearly not as well as I had believed.”

“She really did seem okay with all this, too. I guess the rich do things differently.” She looked back to Louis, ears drooping. “Louis, about what happened outside that night...it’s actually way worse than she made it sound. A lot of animals died. Those Butcher guys were suicide-bombing the place or something, and I heard there were a ton of devourings too.”

“One last push to make the chaos in the city boil over,” said Louis. “But it wasn’t successful?”

“It was pretty scary on the street, but everything’s holding steady. They’re saying that if the black market had gotten blown up too then we’d really be done for. All the meat addicts would have gone crazy. Did you save it?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t know anything about it. But the Butchers are gone.”

Juno nodded slowly. Her eyes flicked between Louis’ gashed face, his snapped antlers, the indentation in his bedsheets where his leg should have been. He could see the gears turning in her mind, trying to find a question that would provide the most information with the least grisly detail.

“How are the lions?” she asked.

“They’re okay. They’re alive. I wasn’t able to say goodbye to them, but that’s fine. I think my time with them is finally done.” Now came the question that he’d dreaded most, the one his leg wouldn’t allow him to forget. “What about Legosi? Have you heard anything?”

Juno looked away. A little serpent of dread uncoiled in Louis’ stomach.

“I was sort of trying to hunt you both down at the same time,” she said, and only now did Louis notice how tired she looked. “Making phone calls while I ran around town. Jack got back to me eventually, he said that he’d heard from Legosi’s grandpa. He’s in a hospital somewhere. Not this one, Azuki asked around for me. I don’t know what his condition is, and Jack seems to be kind of neurotic at the best of times, but...Louis, it didn’t sound good.”

“He’ll pull through.” Vehement, forcing it to become truth by sheer force of will. “He always has before.”

“Of course he will. I’m sure we’ll find out where he is by tomorrow, at least. And then we can see him.”

“Yes. Then we can see him.”

Silence rolled out between them. Outside the window, the twinkling headlights continued their slow promenade through the city streets, like a reflection of orbiting stars. Louis laid his other hand atop Juno’s.

“Azuki was right,” he said. “That was a rather poor confession on my part.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your idea.”

“Not for that. For shouting at you the other day, outside Hi-Collar. I felt horrible about it.”

“I was serious about what I said. Your advice saved me, Juno.” He dug his fingers into the velvety fur atop her palm. “I’m not certain if I can really change what I am. But you, Legosi, the Shishigumi...carnivores seem to help me discover parts of myself I never would have found otherwise. It makes me want to keep you close.”

Juno tried to stay reserved, but as with Legosi, her tail was a traitor, struggling not to wag. She met his gaze fully.

“Do you love me?” she asked. As usual, direct as a sledgehammer. Leaving him with no room to escape.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But I want the chance to try.”

Juno smiled. “I can live with that.”

She was gentle with him. She let his arms enfold her as she leaned in, cradling the back of his head with one hand. For the first time in months he felt the contours of her fangs against his mouth and his blood quickened at the sensation. Her claws prickled his pelt as they kissed; his shivering ears drowned in the thunder of her heartbeat. He was crippled and scarred and his shorn head itched, and in this room, in her grasp, he’d never felt so weak. But it was all right.

* * *

The sky was spent. The typhoon had passed over them, and after another day or two of spitting rain the ever-present cloud cover had gone diaphanous as gauze. According to the forecasts – which, in fairness, many animals were currently disinclined to believe – the city was due for its first glimpse of clear skies in weeks. But for now, sunlight strained through the thinning clouds, strong enough to bestow some proper color on the black-market district.

It had survived, albeit in a wounded state. Not all of the bombs had been taken care of in time, and several of them had gone off in mid-disarming and resulted in deaths – especially from the Cornered Rats, who were small enough to have been mercifully vaporized by the blasts. But the casualties were still minimal, and in the end, the rain had done more damage than the explosives themselves. The market’s makeshift gutters were in shambles and many older apartments were distended and bloating with leaks, on the verge of collapsing entirely. Their residents were homeless or close to it, but at least they weren’t starving.

The remaining Families had worked feverishly through the night of the Butchers’ demise. They knew that Karlov and Pat’s deaths wouldn’t be nearly enough to undo the mess they had made; if the violence and starvation they’d spread was left unchecked then it would demolish their home as surely as another fleet of bombs. The Dokugumi were called into the Butchers’ headquarters and the bodies stacked there were inexpertly dissected, fat and fur still clinging to their skinned remains. It wasn’t much, but it would keep the worst of the addicts satisfied for a little longer. As for other nutrition, Investigator Saya had spent most of the next day immolating every shred of clout she had left to ram through her plan to distribute vegetarian-friendly food to the district’s residents; with Yafya silent and Darth

almost catatonic with stress, the police had begrudgingly left the job to the Families. Boxes of rice cake and soy patties were handed out at the market's major gathering points, with the Madaragumi meaningfully flashing their blades at anyone who got too rowdy. The growling stomachs subsided. Everyone found reprieve. But, as Louis was so fond of insisting, there was still work to be done.

The café where the Family heads often met was still unmanned, and no Kopi Luwak would be served here tonight. But the central table was occupied anyway, at that nexus of alleyways where only a postage stamp of sky was visible overhead. Cruce sat there alone, his leopards massed behind him – including Diego, whose scarred glower had grown even deeper thanks to Free breaking his jaw. Cruce's thumb restlessly popped his katana in and out of its sheath as he waited, the rest of him limp as something drowned. The eyes beneath his hatbrim were bloodshot as always, but this time, it was just exhaustion, not Silvervine, that raised this redness.

Approaching footsteps. Scales glimmered in the scant light. The Dokugumi emerged from the opposite alley, and at their head was Zeke, in his usual attire but without his mask. His tongue flicked as he pulled up his chair and sat down.

"Morning," said Cruce, without hostility.

"I thought you were in jail."

"Yeah. I handed myself off so they'd leave my boys alone. But last night that Civic Harmony investigator sprang me loose. I don't know why. She just said not to waste this chance. So here I am again." His sword hilt clicked. "Story of my life. Nobody will let me stay down."

Zeke's tongue flicked again. After so many years of wearing his mask, it was clear he hadn't figured out how to suppress that nervous habit. He glanced down the southern alleyway. No sign of anyone yet.

"So it's true?" Cruce asked. "About Agrippa?"

"Yes."

"I hated that old bastard. And I haven't forgotten that beatdown you two gave to me the other day. Still, I know how much he meant to you, so...condolences. For what it's worth."

"Thank you," Zeke said. "Now we just need to see how *they* feel about it."

Uneven footsteps approached from the southern alley. The lions had arrived.

They'd made it through their clash with the Butchers in one piece, but that piece had still been dented in places. Sabu's shooting arm was in a sling, and at his age it was unlikely he would ever regain its full function. Miguel had taken a bullet in the hip and was leaning heavily on a cane they'd scrounged up from the tower's storage, one of the superfluous sticks that the pre-Louis lion boss had loved waving around; the creases of pain on his face made it clear that he had only come because of the importance of this occasion. He hobbled up to the

table, pulled up a chair, and stepped back so that the newest leader of the Shishigumi could be seated.

The straps of the patch covering his left eye were hidden beneath his messy mane; the right was half-lidded, its wide, wet pupil shining like a smear of tar. Agata folded his paws on the table and nodded to both Zeke and Cruce in turn.

“Apologies if we kept you waiting,” he said.

When the Butchers who’d ambushed Louis and the Shishigumi had breached the front walls of their headquarters, they’d run into a thresher of lead slung out by the lions taking cover beneath their custom bulletproof tables. Left in disarray and with no cover themselves other than the corpses of their newly-killed brethren, they’d fired back only briefly before electing to suicide-rush the lot of them. Miguel had been caught between reloads and one lupine Butcher had jukeed around the tables and put a round in his leg, and he’d taken aim at Miguel’s heart a split-second before Agata had hurled his own table at the wolf hard enough to practically decapitate them. Agata had rushed into their midst in a roaring frenzy of gunfire, fang, and claw, and the rest of the Shishigumi had emptied their magazines at the Butchers taking aim. It wasn’t until the noise ceased that he noticed the pain from the shot that had grazed his face, or the sudden darkness that had fallen over half his vision. He’d wiped blood off his mouth and pressed forward after determining that none of his comrades had been killed. The next day, when the Shishigumi had held their divination and all their manes had bent in his direction, no one was surprised – including, strangely, Agata himself, who’d accepted their decision without protest.

“So how are we playing this?” Cruce said. “First order of business?”

“As the senior head, I think you should begin,” said Agata.

Cruce anxiously tugged his hatbrim. “Now there’s some shit I never thought I’d hear. Fine, um...my boys will keep handing out rations to everyone for as long as they’re coming. Cops said that it’ll be another couple of days at least before they cut us off. We got a lot of newly homeless animals out there, too. Last I heard most of ‘em are passing through that asshole doctor’s clinic.”

“The meat that the Shishigumi provided us should also keep for another week or so,” said Zeke. “It’s poor quality, but it’ll have to do for now. Agrippa’s old contacts extended feelers to us as soon as they heard of the Butchers’ demise. They were upset to know he’d passed, but they’re eager to make money. The Dokugumi’s own coffers are still fairly deep. We’re going to see what we can do about rebuilding the structures that were damaged by the flooding and the bombs.”

“That sounds fine to me,” said Agata. “But there’s something else we need to discuss before we go any further.”

He folded his paws on the table and turned to Zeke, head tilted slightly. Zeke stared him down as only a lizard could, but Agata didn’t flinch; his remaining eye had turned hard as stone.

“You have my condolences for what happened to Agrippa,” he said. “Regardless of how we felt about him, he was a key figure in the black market. But he was also responsible for the deaths of Renne and Free. How can we be sure that you won’t follow in his footsteps?”

Several of the lizards behind Zeke started to hiss, but he held up his hand and they went silent.

“If you’re asking for an apology then you have it,” he said. “But there’s nothing else I can give. Agrippa was a survivor. He trusted his instincts because they were the reason he’d made it so far. I didn’t agree with his choice to ally with the Butchers or to hand Free over to them, but that doesn’t matter. In his situation – the one I’m in now – I might have done the same.” He held his palms out to the two of them. “I’ll be honest with you, the Dokugumi are weaker than they’ve ever been. Our leader is gone and the Damned 44th have cut ties with us. If you want revenge, now’s the best time to take it.”

Agata looked to Cruce. “What do you think?”

“Ain’t been thinking of much else for a long time,” Cruce growled, gripping his sword. “But I’ll say this. I dunno if Renne really was angling to bump off the rest of you, but if she had, I probably would’ve helped her do it. No more. I’m tired of fighting. The Madaragumi won’t raise their blades to you unless we have to.”

Agata sighed. “The Shishigumi can’t ignore what happened with Melon, either. We all bear some responsibility for the black market’s condition. If that’s how everyone feels, then I’m proposing a ceasefire. No more turf wars for the time being. And while I’m sure we’ll all continue to fund our gangs as we see fit, we split the profits from the meat trade until further notice. At least until we’re all back on our feet.”

“Is that your vision for the future?” Zeke asked, with a note of acid. “Peace and prosperity for all?”

Agata angled his head again, so that the strands of his mane twitched in hypnotic patterns. “Don’t insult my intelligence, please. There isn’t any nobility sitting at this table. We’re all just killers and thieves in the end. But this is still our home, and there are plenty of other killers out there watching it, especially after what happened the other night. If we’re too busy biting each other’s backs to defend what’s ours, then one of them will find their way in here just like Karlov did. And I don’t think any of us will survive what happens next.” He looked back to the other Shishigumi. “I’m going to protect my Family with everything I have. I know that both of you will do the same.”

Neither of the other two bosses answered for a time. Zeke’s tongue curled and teased at his protruding fang. Cruce looked up to Diego, who shrugged and nodded.

“After the shindig you pulled at that shithead Karlov’s place, I’d say you’ve proved your intentions well enough,” Cruce said. “If you want us to play nice for now, then I’m for it. We’re gonna need to stay real quiet until the cops quit looking for a reason to snuff us out, anyway.”

“Agreed,” said Zeke.

“Good. Is there anything else?” Agata asked. They glanced at each other, then shook their heads. “In that case, we’ll be leaving. We still need to recover from the fight.”

“Diego’s sorry for what he did to Free, by the way,” said Cruce. “Wanted me to tell you that. He can’t talk too good right now.”

Agata nodded, and then rose from his seat and motioned for the lions to go. They turned as one and left the way they came, Miguel at the back, Agata keeping pace by his side. Cruce and Zeke watched after them.

“Smart kid,” said Cruce. “He’s giving off a different vibe from last time I saw him.”

“Combat changes us,” Zeke said.

“Or just brings out a side we ain’t seen before. While we’re making requests, I got one myself.”

“What is it?”

“Seems like you’ll be the one who brings the meat back in our market,” Cruce said. “But do us all a favor and keep out the scam artists. Renne was right about that. If the stalls fill up with shit-smear roadkill then the addicts will start to hunt live prey again.”

“It’ll be difficult,” said Zeke. “Agrippa’s suppliers are used to the old ways. They might need some persuasion.”

Cruce popped his blade free and it glinted silver in the brightening light. “We’ve got our share of persuaders.”

“Alright. We’ll let you know if it becomes necessary.” He started to leave, but then Cruce raised his head, squinting from under the shadow of his hat.

“Hey, Zeke. You ever think this day would come?”

“You never know it’s coming until it’s there.” He turned to join the rest of his kin. “And then it’s there.”

* * *

When they left the side alleys, Agata made his way to the front of the group, the other lions slouching into line. The black market was still eerily quiet, but now it was slumbering, not dead. There were still a lot of hungry stomachs to fill before it could be coaxed fully back to its old self. The clouds overhead were being shot through to tatters, and sunbeams lay on still-wet streets, making everything look wrapped in plastic.

“So,” Agata said. “How you’d like my Louis impression?”

The Shishigumi burst into cheers; Dope ran up and slapped him hard on the back, and then he was mobbed in a cluster of their bodies, grinning sheepishly as he was bombarded with congratulations. Miguel and Sabu hung back, but looked no less pleased.

“I fuckin’ *knew* that’s what you were doing!” Jimma said. “The minute you opened your mouth I thought, oh shit, is he doing what I think he’s doing?”

“He even pulled off that little head-tilt Louis liked so much,” Hino said, and imitated the gesture, face solemn. “The one that says, *‘I have a lot of patience for your bullshit, but God help you if it runs out.’*”

“Couldn’t have gone better.” Dope backed off and bowed, not entirely facetiously. “Nice work, boss.”

“We need to think about what’s next for us,” said Miguel.

Agata gave him a look. “After you’ve recovered, you mean.”

“I just have to stay off my feet. But the rest of us can’t afford to do the same. Our tower’s falling apart, for starters. Nothing else we do will mean much if the roof collapses on our heads.”

“We should keep an eye on the gambling dens,” said Dope. “Animals ‘round here are gonna want to blow off stress and need to get our share.”

“And the vendors need a checkup when they start to reopen,” Hino added. “I think we can waive the last few weeks of protection fees, given the circumstances, but the hustle doesn’t end. We’ve protected this place well enough, anyway.”

“All good ideas,” said Agata, walking off again. “I want us to start recruiting again, too. Keep an eye out for any lions who might be a good fit. Ones like Free, stuck in the gutter and hoping for something better. Call me naïve if you want, but I don’t think we should keep treating this life like it’s a one-way ticket to hell. It can raise us up. Higher than we ever thought we’d go.”

He no longer heard footsteps behind him. He stopped, turned, and saw the other lions all looking back, at the mass of leopards advancing on them from the other end of the street. Cruce headed them up, one hand on his sword, face buried in shadow.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me,” Dope snarled, while Sabu pulled aside his jacket. “They couldn’t even wait a whole day?”

“They’re still at range. If we flash our guns then maybe we can scare ‘em off,” said Hino. “Boss, you hang back and let us...boss? Agata, hold up!”

Agata strode through them and out the other side, pushing away Hino’s hand. The other leopards came to a halt as Cruce pushed forward, occasionally balancing himself on his katana like a walking stick. Agata’s stride was steady but his tail lashed back and forth; as Louis had found out, Cruce could still be lightning-quick if the need arose. They approached each other like duelists, and stopped within arm’s reach.

“Was there something else?” Agata said.

Cruce glanced back at his gang, as if for affirmation, and then locked eyes with Agata again. “Sort of. It’s about something you said at the meeting. How more outsiders might be looking to start shit.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that for a while,” he said. “There’s this story going ‘round, you see. About this deer they called the Prince of the Black Market. Some herbivore runt who took over one of the city’s biggest gangs and had everyone eating out the palm of his hand inside a month. A lot of folks thought it was bullshit, ‘til the market started getting choked to death by this bunch of psychos hiding out somewhere underground. It got so bad that the Prince came outta retirement for a night, and the next day, all those assholes were dead and gone. Not a trace to be seen.” He slowly rubbed his belly. “That kinda gossip travels far. I’m sure it’ll reach the ears of anyone scoping this place out for an easy score.”

Agata’s eye narrowed. “We’ve been too busy to talk about that night. I wonder who’s been spreading the rumors?”

“Who knows,” said Cruce, stone-faced. “Word gets around.”

Agata nodded, and the tension in the air went slack. Cruce shuffled in place as if he’d forgotten how he’d come to be here.

“I met him, you know,” Cruce said. “The day he came to get Free. He’s really something.”

“He is. But I hope he never comes back here.”

“Makes sense. You want to protect the ones you care about.”

“Yes.”

“We can’t hold back the Day of Depravity forever. Assuming I ain’t kicked the bucket by then, we’ll probably have to square off.” Cruce held out his katana, sheathed and horizontal, like he was presenting it for inspection. “Until that time comes, I’ll stay out of your way. You let us know if you ever need anything.”

He stuck his thumb and forefinger in his mouth and whistled, and the sound rippled through the leopards gathered behind them. Cruce stepped back into their ranks, and the Madaragumi dispersed through the side roads of the black market, their spotted pelts swirling, uniform, and then already gone. Agata remained where he was; after a little while, Miguel limped up behind him, kneaded his shoulder in approval.

“You handled that well,” he said. “And it wasn’t some Louis impersonation. It was all you.”

Dope crossed his arms. “Our little cub’s turning into a king.”

“Let’s not put too much pressure on him,” Miguel said dryly, and then he realized that Agata still hadn’t moved. “Boss? Something the matter?”

He stared down one of the side roads where the walls were splintered and close, the asphalt cracked like a dried lake-bed. Two nights ago, he'd brought a half-conscious Louis out into the still-dripping streets and felt his body rouse in Agata's arms, watched him extend a hand to an alley much like this one, and at its mouth he had seen them, those misty silhouettes shot through with fiery white. As they had turned away, he'd been tempted for a moment to run after them, crying Dolph's name, but then Louis' arm had fallen limp and he'd held the deer to his chest and carried him home.

He looked at Miguel and smiled. "We should get going."

"Agreed. You know...I've never seen the market like this before. All quiet and bright. It's like that typhoon scrubbed it clean for a little while. Not to sound sappy or anything, but it's kind of beautiful."

"It is," said Agata. "Wonders never cease."

* * *

On the city's east end, far out of sight from the spire of police HQ, a cherry-red cable bridge connected the metropolis to the outlying suburbs. There were walkways where pedestrians could watch the languorous flow of the river beneath; on a clear day, the mountains' misty hulks could be seen in the far distance. Yafya and Gosha had stood here together when the latter had announced his decision to move in with a young she-wolf they'd rescued months before, and that had been the last that either of them had seen of each other for seventeen years. Time had flowed like this water, picking up all manner of filth in its passing.

Yafya leaned on the rail, mane unkempt, his overcoat twitching in the growing breeze. It was the onset of dusk and the horizon was aflame with sunset, the river reflecting the same gutted, sanguine skies he'd seen on the day that he'd last spoken to Legosi. Cars trundled to and fro behind him, and his panoramic vision detected every one, glimpsed the drivers within casting puzzled glances at him as they, presumably, wondered where they had seen this horse before. He wanted his blindfold but it would have given away his identity for certain.

He hadn't been of much use the night of the Butchers' final delivery. After being hustled away from the would-be springbok bomber's corpse, he'd given Saya dispensation to use his authority as she saw fit and accompanied her from scene to scene as she frantically attempted to keep order. He'd been given the news about how some of the Cornered Rats had perished in their attempts to defuse the black market's bombs; the rest didn't blame him for it, which made it even worse. The day after, he'd taken a difficult phone call, released the rats from his service, and left the station without a word. He'd been at this bridge for several hours now, observing the sun's slow pace across its axis, forcing himself not to think.

Despite the clearing weather, the walkway had remained empty. No one was really in the mood for sight-seeing. But someone approached him now, and while he noticed them from far away he neither turned nor spoke as they sidled up to him and brought a can of Yuuhi beer up to his face.

"Had a notion I'd find you here," said Gosha.

Yafya took the drink. "I hate this brand."

"Still? I guess some things never change." He took his place on the rail beside Yafya and popped open his own can. They drank, the silence broken only by the passing cars' drone.

"I told them not to let anyone see me," Yafya said. "So it must have been Cromwell."

"Bingo. Bumped into him while I was hassling the front desk and he said you'd taken off. I made my own deductions from there." He kneaded his drink between his scaled palms. "He was in a sharing mood."

"Then I assume you heard what happened."

"The gist of it." Gosha glanced over to him. "Do you know who he was?"

"I looked into it," Yafya said dully. "Years back, I got wind of some up-and-coming drug dealers operating outside the black market. Some kind of steroid cocktail, not too different from the blood-bone drug. All spotted felines. Might have been some kids looking to catch the Madaragumi's notice or something. The springbok wasn't involved but he'd grown up with one of the dealers since grade school. He disappeared from his home address after I dealt with them all. And we can guess at the rest."

"What happened to them?" Gosha asked. "The dealers, I mean."

Yafya bent low, the can crinkling in his grip. That was answer enough. Gosha sighed.

"I'd heard the rumors about you. Didn't want to believe 'em, mostly because I felt responsible. Leaving you in the lurch like that. But the bad you did doesn't excuse the bad they did. Doesn't change the good you've done, either. You're still the Beastar. Best thing now is to try and make up for all of it."

"I can't. Not as the Beastar, anyway."

He looked up sharply. "You mean...?"

"Central contacted me yesterday. I've been asked to retire. And I can't disagree." He pulled his collar up as another car passed. "I spent all those years blithely moving toward my vision of a perfect society. Never looking back at the wreckage I'd left in my wake. Pat might have twisted it to his own purposes, but I'm the one who gave him that opportunity." He chuckled bitterly. "That springbok must have died thinking he'd set off his detonator. At least he found a little happiness in the end."

Gosha's face sagged. He laid a hand on the railing between them. "So what's next for you?"

"I don't know. They can't replace me until they've found a successor. I think they were planning for Investigator Saya to accept, but yesterday afternoon she personally sprang the Madaragumi's leader out of the holding cells and then left the precinct. She must have disagreed with their choice."

“I know how this sounds coming from me, but as the years went on, I became less sure about this whole Beastar business. Society’s changing too damn fast for just one animal to shoulder it all.”

“Maybe,” said Yafya, and Gosha nodded and raised his drink. “But for what it’s worth, I nominated Legosi.”

Gosha’s eyes bulged and he coughed out his beer. He wiped his mouth, boggling. “You can’t be serious!”

“His role in Pat’s downfall is being covered up as usual, and I doubt Central gives a damn about my opinion on the matter anyway, but he’s the first animal that came to mind. For better or worse, no one else has made such an impact on me.” He brushed his mane out of his eyes. “And there’s something else. I told them I wouldn’t make a fuss about stepping down if they let me remove the predation mark from his record. He’s back to being a normal wolf as far as the law is concerned.”

The corners of Gosha’s mouth raised, then lowered, and he went back to looking at the river. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate it.”

“How is he?” Yafya asked.

“Come on, Yafya, there’s no need to dwell on that,” he said briskly. “You’ve seen how quickly he bounces back.”

“Gosha.”

His head turned to Yafya, jerkily, like his neck had rusted. Yafya stared back at him, his long face drawn and weary. Gosha’s mouth pursed and he set his beer on the rail, kneaded his hands together with a sound like scraping glass. The sun had mostly set now, the sky’s bloodstains turning to bruise; the cars switched on their headlights and their two shadows crawled like compass-needles as those lights passed. When Gosha finally spoke, Yafya had to strain to hear.

“I visited him,” he said. “He’d just gotten out of surgery but they let me see him anyway. I guess the police let them know I was coming. I couldn’t understand most of what the doctor told me, but it isn’t good. Worse than when he got shot before. That terrorist opened him up like a tin can. I looked at his bed and there were so many tubes and bandages all over that for a second I wondered where my grandson had gone.”

“He’ll recover,” said Yafya quickly – this had gone down a darker road than he’d expected. “I’ll foot the bill myself. Whatever he needs. It’s the least I can do.”

“Yeah. If he...*when* he wakes up, they said they might be able to do fur grafts, to cover up some of the scarring. Did I ever tell you about my daughter?”

“No. But I know about it.” He’d pieced together a quick dossier on Gosha before stopping in to visit him personally – his wife’s sudden death, his daughter’s suicide, his grandson’s estrangement. He’d felt a nasty little surge of pleasure at seeing all his views on cross-species

relationships vindicated so succinctly. Remembering that feeling now made him want to leap off this bridge.

“When the mutations started getting bad, she’d looked into grafts too. But it wouldn’t work, not with the scales.” He smiled weakly. “She was always so fixated on appearances. Practically sprinted into her decision to have Legosi when she first started changing. I wasn’t sure if it was such a good idea, a child’s a big responsibility at the best of times, but I could hardly say anything about it. Then I saw the way she cared for him, and realized how wrong I’d been to doubt her. Vanity had nothing to do with that choice. He was just her way of making the world a little better than how she’d found it. And after the funeral...you know, it was a lovely service, I kept my distance from everyone, they had grief enough already without me skulking around the place. But after, at the grave, I remember it so well. Legosi kneeling there, touching the stone. And I thought to myself, ‘You did it, sweetheart. He’s such a great kid.’”

The air bit cold. Gosha’s throat worked as if he was trying to swallow a troublesome kernel of something; other than that, he’d gone completely still.

“Are you okay?” Yafya asked.

“Sure, ‘course I am. I just...” His voice cracked, and he breathed deep and tried again. “Just give me a minute to...”

The words dissolved and he hunched over the rail as if struck by a cramp, his breath turning to hiccups. His elbow bumped the beer can as he started sobbing and it hit the pavement, trickling amber droplets. Yafya said his name, first with concern and then with alarm, because Gosha’s cries didn’t stop, they were rising to a hysterical pitch, and now he clutched his head as if to tear these memories out of his skull. Yafya put an arm over his shoulders and when that didn’t help he turned Gosha around and embraced him fully, heedless of the threat of venom as the old lizard wailed into his shoulder. Yafya shut his eyes and through his lids he could see the headlights’ glow as these anonymous travelers crossed the bridge and took in the scene, but they didn’t matter. They weren’t even there.

* * *

Legosi had been taken to the same large-breed canine hospital that had cared for him earlier that year. It was located in an untidy sprawl of buildings downtown, not far from the bridge where Gosha and Yafya now stood – a claustrophobic jigsaw of polygonal high-rises that lurked just on the border of the hills. The streets here could be cramped but the hospital itself had a fairly spacious cobblestone plaza around its entrance, lined with concrete planters that now held nothing but dead branches and dry mulch. The hospital, as well as many others in the city, bustled with the numerous injured from the Butchers’ bombings, but one animal had loitered near the withered gardens for a while now, his monochrome pelt growing less distinct as night fell.

Gouhin lit his latest cigarette and tucked it between his teeth. The mulch behind him had been turned into a graveyard of crushed ends. Chain-smoking like this was a bad idea at his age, but right now he’d prefer to worry about lung cancer than everything else on his plate.

When the Shishigumi had conveyed Louis' wishes to prepare his clinic for any animals who might flee their homes in the wake of their battle with the Butchers, Gouhin had been tempted to hurl them out a window, not in the least because it was a good idea – he hated the way that deer was tugging everyone's strings. But for all of Louis' foresight, he'd been wrong about one key detail; it wasn't the fighting but the flooding that had evicted many of the black market's residents. Gouhin had spent a bone-cracking day repurposing the clinic as a rough shelter with any materials he had on hand and then conscripted the police and the remaining Cornered Rats to spread the word, and by the next morning, the place was crammed shoulder-to-jowl with shivering carnivores who clutched their meager possessions in trash or laundry bags and waited mutely for the future to roll over them.

Over the course of his long and perilous career as the black market's vigilante psychotherapist, Gouhin had made connections with shelters, hospitals, and halfway homes all over the city, and much of his work now consisted of getting these animals to one of those destinations so they could have a place to stay until the clouds of bad fortune over their lives cleared a little bit. He'd expected trouble, maybe even a mauling, but their exhaustion and his reputation seemed to win out over their hunger. And he had help – the Cornered Rats had stuck around, telling him that they'd been dismissed from the Beastar's employ. Many of them had timidly asked to be retained full-time, salary negotiable. Apparently they'd liked what they'd seen of his business when he'd rescued Yafya from Pat earlier. The idea was tempting, but it had to wait. All of it had to wait, until this visit.

He'd left his clinic in rats' care, gone into the hospital around two hours ago, come out again, and then hung around here to watch the comings and goings of other patients and those who wanted to see them. There was one figure in particular he was looking for. While he didn't have a complete description, he had a hunch that he'd know her when he saw her.

His cigarette flared. There she was now, tottering along in this crowd of larger beasts. She stopped and stared up at the hospital as if intending to climb up its walls with her bare hands.

"Excuse me," he said. "Is your name Haru?"

The dwarf rabbit started and looked at him, ears swaying. She wore a heavy knit sweater that was a little too large and, Gouhin noticed, a close color match to a certain wolf's pelt. She looked him over and the surprise drained from her expression.

"Yes, it is," she said. "I'm assuming that you're Dr. Gouhin."

"So he's told you about me."

"A little. And you kind of stand out." Her stance turned confident, a little impatient. "Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes and no. More like I was using you as an excuse to get away from work for a little while. It's rough over there, if you don't mind my saying." He blew smoke and tucked the cigarette behind his ear. "Hospital told me you hadn't stopped by yet, so I figured this would be my best chance to finally meet the fabled Haru."

"Here I am." She spread her arms wide and let them flop down. "Can I see him?"

“Yeah, you’re good. It’s tough for any of these places to take in visitors right now, what with the bombings and all, but I have some clout at this one. Just mention my name and they’ll wave you through.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She took a step forward and then stopped like she’d suddenly found herself on a high ledge. “How is he?”

He let out a rumbling sigh, hands clasped between his knees. While Gouhin styled himself as a psychotherapist, he did have enough actual medical experience to know what a misery this part of the job was. Gauging the patient’s friends and kin, to see how much bad news they could take.

The gunshot hadn’t hit any of Legosi’s organs, and while his face was fractured and horribly bruised, that would probably heal without much trouble. But he was in tatters. Pat had ripped into him so badly that it had taken hours to re-assemble what remained of his pelt, and he’d gone into shock from blood loss well before passing through the hospital doors. Cracked ribs, bruised kidneys, broken arm, a mountain of indignities well beyond what the average spirit should expect to bear. And there was something else. The true reason he’d waited so long for the chance to intercept Haru.

“You’ll want to prepare yourself,” he said, and Haru’s ears drooped. “This animal he was fighting used reinforced prosthetic claws and laid into him pretty good. His face didn’t get ripped up, but the rest of him...he’s lost a lot of blood, just for starters. And he was fighting in a damn garbage pit, so there’s probably infection too.” He rubbed his scarred eye. “I know it ain’t exactly scientific for a doctor to talk about someone’s will to live, but a body gets tired. My guess is that what happens next is up to him.”

She clenched her fists, spoke forcefully. “We made a lot of big, stupid promises to each other before he left that night. He’s not going to give up on us now.”

“There’s something else. This guy, Pat, he didn’t exactly believe in fair play.”

“Legosi said something like that. What about it?”

“He dosed his claws with Komodo dragon venom,” Gouhin said. “Concentrated. Even with the rain washing out his cuts, the nurses used hazard gear to handle Legosi’s body when he got in there. It should have killed him ten times over before he ever made it out of the black market. The only kind of animal immune to that venom is another Komodo dragon.” He watched her carefully. “Did he ever tell you that he was a hybrid?”

She didn’t answer. She’d gone still. Before he pressed on, Gouhin recalled the chew marks on Legosi’s arms – ironically, Pat had probably doomed himself right then and there. Even if he’d walked away from that fight, the toxic blood he must have swallowed would have brought him down. He’d seemed determined to go out with death in his mouth.

“I only figured it out after his other run-in with Pat,” he said. “It’s understandable he’d keep it a secret from you. It’s tough for carnivores to have relationships with herbivores, impossible if they have a predation offense. But even if his record was clean, if the law got so much as a hint that he might become venomous someday, it’d amount to the same thing.” He

shook his head, rubbed his chin. “I asked the hospital to keep this quiet. He’s suffered enough and it’s clear that he cares for you an awful lot. But you ought to have all the facts. For your safety and his...”

He trailed off and shut up, because while Haru still hadn’t changed her expression or posture, this tiny rabbit was now giving him a tingle that could normally only be accomplished by a wall-eyed meat junkie charging at him down a narrow street.

“Thank you for your concern,” she said stiffly. “Have a good evening.”

She walked with head down and arms swinging and disappeared through the hospital doors. Gouhin watched the glass close up behind her, and then looked up, at the constellation of scattered lights through the windows overhead. He shook his head and re-lit his cigarette end, and then set off home.

Unease still hung rank in the air. These animals talked and laughed and ate like before but under their skins they could sense the advent of a great change, like the arthritis-chewing shift in atmosphere before the typhoon had come. Their society had been rocked on its foundation and it would be awhile yet before it steadied, and no one knew what shape it would take once it did. At his clinic he kept the strays and refugees fed and sent them on their way, and they muttered thank-yous and disappeared into what they must have believed to just be another sort of misery. So many of them had lived on the ragged edge for so long that they no longer entertained the possibility of better things. Gouhin’s idealism had been almost wholly consumed by the crusade he’d undertaken in the black market, but he still couldn’t understand why this world made it so difficult for someone to find a little bit of happiness.

He passed by a sewer grate, took one final drag on his cigarette, and flicked it inside. For an instant, it could be seen down there, a lone ember in the intervening darkness. Then it struck the rushing water underneath, and went out.

Are You a Star?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His hospital room was a hard white like the surface of the moon, and the beep of his heart monitor and the wheeze of his oxygen mask counterpointed the fluorescents' somnolent hum. He lay with his bedsheets up to his waist in a squidlike embrace of cords and tubes, filling his ravaged body with the blood it had lost and medicine to fight back the infections it may have gained. His broken arm was borne up in a sling and his torso was encased in a mad crisscross of gauze under which the uneven topography of his flesh could still be faintly seen, fresh peaks and valleys clawed into his pelt. Legosi was there in the bed, but he was also beside it, looking down at it, the world passing through him like mist.

Here he was again.

He wore the same pale and shapeless clothes he'd appeared in the last time he'd straddled the border of life and death, the same color as the bandages that now encased the body he'd left behind. Back then he'd examined it with something like curiosity, distracted at the novelty of it all, but now he just wanted to apologize to this body that had done no wrong, certainly nothing to deserve the pain that its owner had visited upon it. Outside the halls still bustled with harried staff and buzzing phones, but this body had been repaired to the best of the hospital's ability, and they had left it here alone to live or die as it wished.

"Mom?" Legosi asked. But no answer. Leano was not here.

Moving around like this had the disconnectedness of a dream; he wanted to visit the hospital roof and then he was there, with no recollection of the intervening space. The rooftop was an empty and clean-swept expanse of concrete that apparently doubled as a lounging area in the warmer months, decorated with more dried planters and some forgotten patio chairs left to molder and rust. Perfect for moon-gazing. He could see it now, not full but getting there, a fattened oblong in a sky that hadn't yet gone fully dark.

He approached the concrete lip where he'd sat with his mother and looked out at the city below. He observed the promenade of headlights, the glow from windows, the specks of wandering animals. The familiarity of it all relieved him. He'd never fully felt like a part of this world, his species and his traumas leaving him with all sharp edges that wouldn't slot into its shape. For a little while he thought that he'd made a place for himself here and that had just ended in greater disaster. He clasped his hand over the knuckles that had mashed Pat's face to pulp and hoped that such an ugly, indulgent act had at least brought some good to these creatures below. He wished them all the very best.

Legosi raised his head to the moon, but then stopped halfway, squinting. There were other lights here, rising like paper lanterns above the skyline. He'd never seen anything like them before.

He stepped off the roof and with that same hazy ease crossed the distance between it and these lights, walking on air, the city's movement beneath his feet like that of fish under glass. The lights grew and revealed themselves to be made of more lights still, innumerable prismatic motes like a swarm of fireflies massed together in a rough shape. Legosi approached with gentle wonderment and saw that the shape was bestial, some animal of indistinct species with head and arms limp like a sleepwalker's, untethered, drifting upwards. He waved his hand through it and the motes parted and rejoined, but the animal-shape didn't stir.

They were all around. Rising from the living world. He saw them and he was there, moving through this crowd of souls, some larger and some smaller and all of them rendered indistinct by the shine, an endless field of wayward stars. He wondered who he might find here if he could only make out their faces – his mother, or Free, or Agrippa, or even Pat with his fearsome and voracious will, all shorn of their skins to reveal this luminance underneath, all rising to some destination that would never be charted nor understood by anyone except those bound to it. The sounds of the city beneath were growing fainter; he looked down and gaped as he saw the motes dancing under his pelt, a circulation of light through the body to which he'd always felt so ill-suited.

Legosi thought, *I could go with them.*

They were past whatever ragged clouds which had still clung on after the long rain, and the first hard chips of stars had appeared. There was a warmth rising up in Legosi, a sense of overwhelming gratitude for all that he seen and cherished below, the ones who had raised him out of the quiet and uncertain life he'd lived and granted him a taste of something better – all these animals, shining so brightly, the ones he'd met and wished to meet and had wished to meet again. It grew until he thought he might burst, and indeed he could feel this light that was becoming one with him and had always been with him shedding the skin that had contained it. He reached up to the glimmering skies, and someone took his hand.

* * *

Haru crossed the mobbed waiting room and stepped up to the front desk; the receptionists didn't seem eager to assist her, but she mentioned Legosi's and Gouhin's names and like a magic incantation she was waved through. A nurse was assigned to her, a sand fox whose species' famously stiff features still couldn't hide her exhaustion, but she was polite with Haru as she guided her through the halls. They stopped at a room on the hospital's third floor and the nurse flipped through the nearby chart.

"I'm sorry, but he's still in critical condition. His injuries were--"

"I already know," Haru said. "Can I have some time alone with him?"

"Yes, that's fine. I can come back to check up on you in fifteen minutes or so. If you don't mind my asking, what's your relation to the patient?"

"He's my boyfriend," she said, without emotion. The nurse's face betrayed nothing, though her hand did pause a moment on the doorhandle before opening it. She ushered Haru through and quietly shut the door behind her.

As she stood in this room so white that she may have disappeared into it if she closed her eyes, she was struck by a vertiginous sensation at this shape on the bed – like Gosha before her, it took a moment to recognize it as Legosi, and when the details clicked into place it made her stomach lurch. She approached him as if he was wired up to explode, the heart monitor's relentless tempo marking off her footsteps. The bed came up to her chest and she gripped the rails and looked at him, the body she'd lain on less than two weeks ago cocooned in gauze and strangely lumpen, the arms that had been so hesitant to encircle her now bristling with tubes. She waited for tears but none came.

A wolf and rabbit together. She'd worried about it. Of course she had. There were practical considerations to a relationship like this, issues of biology that Legosi either couldn't or wouldn't care about but had still festered in her mind no matter how hard she'd tried to cover it up. And the worst of them was the possibility of children, which she herself was ambivalent towards but was certain a hopeless romantic like Legosi would raise eventually. All the reading she'd done on the topic was either full of dark predictions, vicious speciesism, or both. There had been nothing to set her mind at ease except faith, which had been growing thinner by the day.

And all this time, the answer had been right in front of her. If Haru had known an inter-species relationship could create someone like him, she never would have thought twice.

His unbroken arm lay across his chest and the hand there was also bandaged and compressed. She wondered what had happened to it. For all Legosi's fretting about the temptation of violence that had supposedly infected his spirit, she'd only seen him raise his fists once; all her other experiences with his touch had been nervous, delicate. On one visit to his apartment she had watched him guide a stray beetle onto his fingertip and lead it out the window, and he'd always handled her with that same gentleness. But that hadn't been enough. They would never grow close if he treated her like something he might break. If he kept rushing out to break himself this way.

She grasped his hand and pulled it toward herself, and found herself straining with the weight of this single limb; it felt heavy as the sacks of fertilizer she would haul out the gardening shed. It radiated sick heat through the bandages and through her sweater as she pressed it to her chest and squeezed until she thought her fingers might punch clean through him. Now the tears were coming, and with it a boiling resentment from some dark corner of her left unexplored; she clutched what remained of him and shut her eyes tight so that the sterile whiteness of this room was erased by dark and she cursed her weakness, cursed his foolishness, wished for the gathering of another storm a hundred times more cataclysmic than the last that would hammer every inch of this wretched society until all trace had been washed down into the subterranean rivers of filth that it spewed forth. All of it unsalvageable, lost and never to be returned or missed.

What about love?

She gasped and her head snapped up, eyes suddenly wide. That thought had come from her head but not her voice – that soft, rumbling monotone only belonged to one animal she knew. And then she noticed the fingers that she held had curled, ever so slightly. Legosi's own eyes had opened the least sliver, those pinprick pupils watching her.

Haru nearly collapsed with relief right there. But she steadied herself, and then bent down and kissed his hand.

“Caught you,” she said.

* * *

He spent the next two days drifting in and out through a stupor of painkillers, barely noticing the passing of time except for the patterns of light that his window cast across the room. But he was anchored here now, in this body that would patiently raise complaints for each of the indignities he had foisted upon it, and the sling ensured that he could barely move an inch throughout it all. He endured it, thought of it as a kind of penance when his head was clear enough to think. Eventually his drug regimen was eased and the IV’s unplugged from his flesh; he was moved out of intensive care but remained bedridden. The pain became at once clearer and easier to bear, because of the visitors.

They came in shifts, trooping in and out of his hospital room with news and rebukes and well-wishes. Legosi was seldom coherent enough to carry on a conversation with them and wouldn’t know what to say if he had, but he hoped that he was able to show his gratitude as they broke up the long days. His pinned tail struggled to wag at each new arrival, even when they didn’t always go well.

Gouhin: he was the first, stopping in the same day his painkiller dosage had been dropped. He sat in the chair beside the bed and crossed his arms and stared hard at the wall, gruffly describing rehab exercises and dietary regimens that Legosi would forget that same afternoon. He brought the latest from the black market, talked about the disarmed bombs and the wave of refugees that would continue to process for quite some time. Legosi asked about the Families, and Gouhin huffed and remarked that they weren’t killing each other for the moment. Then Legosi had brought up the debt that he still owed the doctor – the secret that was meant to be payment for the treatment he’d received after his first meeting with Pat. He got as far as mentioning his grandfather before Gouhin laid a hand on his shoulder and showed him the tenderest smile he’d ever seen from the grizzled panda. It stunned him, and before he was able to recover from it, Gouhin rose from his seat and left the room without another word.

Bebebe: his coworkers would trickle in little by little, slowly burying him in get-well cards, but Sunaga was the first, arriving alone in a faded button-up and khakis that took Legosi aback for a moment – he’d never seen the owl outside of his work uniform. Banal conversation about the state of the restaurant quickly dried up. Sunaga seemed ill at ease.

“I keep thinking this is my fault,” he said. “It all started to go wrong after that delivery.”

“I wanted to do it. You never forced me.”

“Those bears dropped by earlier, you know. They asked for you by name. I didn’t have the heart to tell them the truth.” He placed his wing on Legosi’s bed. “What happened that night wasn’t a simple mugging, was it?”

“No. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d believe me if I told you everything.”

“You’re probably right. But after the police dragged away these hoodlums who’d showed up outside my restaurant, I thought of the trouble that you had run into at the black market. Legosi, that Komodo dragon...”

“He’s my grandfather.” No point in trying to hide it anymore. Sunaga’s beak clacked contemplatively and then he got up.

“Ask him to come back sometime,” he said, and that was that.

The Hidden Condo: his neighbors had arrived in one solid group escorted by the increasingly bewildered nurses, and brought with them an embarrassment of gifts. Mugi had more fruit that Legosi wasn’t even sure he could eat, Ebisu handed him some kind of whittled helical structure that he insisted was a good-luck charm, Bogue had an early copy of his latest manuscript that he made Legosi promise not to share. Even the landlord was there, hanging back in the doorway, and gruffly said that his outstanding rent had already been taken care of. The atmosphere had been amiable until Sebun had snapped and rushed out from the midst of them and gripped the edge of his mattress, her face contorted and tearful.

“You saved me,” she whispered fiercely. “That day on the train. I didn’t have anything left, I don’t know what I would have done and you saved me. So you can’t do this to yourself again, understand? You can’t...you just can’t...”

Zaguān, ever a picture of serenity, had taken the weeping sheep by the shoulder and guided her out of the room. He hadn’t said a word during the whole visit, but he’d gotten skilled enough at communication without speaking; the look he gave Legosi on the way out eased some of his guilt.

Cherryton: the 701 canines had come first, their emotions contorting their tails into unreadable shapes. Collot was an unshakeable pillar as Voss sniffled atop his shoulder, but Miguno babbled a rapid patter of schoolyard gossip that became dangerously close to hysterics until Durham shook him out of it and then apologetically excused himself, saying that the stench of this place was making him nauseous. Jack had all but fallen to his knees and begged Legosi’s forgiveness for handing Gosha’s contact information to Louis, and Legosi was still too foggy to properly explain why this wasn’t something that warranted an apology in the first place. Then he saw Jack’s eyes brimming with tears, and smiled, to Jack’s confusion.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You’re crying,” said Legosi. “No onions this time.”

Jack stared, then covered his mouth, giggling helplessly. “Same old Legosi.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Collot rumbled, Voss tilting his head.

“It’s nothing, don’t worry about it,” Jack said. “I’ll be back, Legosi. And I learned a lot about you, when you were gone. About what you did onstage. It’s actually really interesting!”

“What? From who? What did you-”

“You’ll probably find out soon,” said Miguno. “Tell Juno we said thanks, alright? She’s been great.”

They left him to ask his questions to himself, and the next day, Jack made good on his promise. He came with the entire drama club but stayed unusually close to *Pina* of all animals, the sheep staying in his own private corner to quietly enjoy the show. It wasn’t all positive – Bill actually cracked first, making a single weak joke about how Legosi resembled his costume from the Adler play before his mouth started quivering and he hastily excused himself, with a worried Dom and Els trailing in his wake. Juno was there too, and brought the first news of Louis. He’d been stuck in his hospital room until he was fully recovered despite his insistences that his recovery had ended days ago, and intended to stop by as soon as he was able. Legosi picked up an odd whiff of something familiar under her usual scent, but the room was so crowded that he couldn’t place it. They said their goodbyes, with Jack being the last – or so Legosi thought, until he noticed Pina still in his same place, camouflaged against the white walls.

“Not the best showing from our president, but I do suppose he’s been under a lot of stress from keeping this motley bunch together,” Pina said, and smirked. “You get uglier every time I see you.”

Now that it was just the two of them, his nose was better able to focus. He sniffed and caught the Labrador residue drifting around Pina.

“You and Jack?” he asked.

“Yes, he’s a clingy one. I’d appreciate it if you recovered as soon as possible. Playing emotional-support sheep kept me amused for a little while, but his neediness gets tiring.”

Realization dawned. He nodded gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for. I’m just following a trend.” He pushed away from the wall and advanced on him, tail swaying. “Juno’s been working hard to keep all of your acquaintances in touch with each other, you know. It’s almost enough to make you forget about that tiresome segregation policy that’s still in place at the school.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Don’t like it? It’s unbearable. What’s life without variety? There’s so many tedious schisms opening up everywhere these days, not just Cherryton – between herbivore and carnivore, the weak and the strong...or the handsome and the homely.” He brushed a lock of wool away from his face and loomed over Legosi’s bed. “I don’t see why this club’s carnivores should be the only ones to bridge those gaps. We all need to do our part.”

Legosi started to speak, but Pina put a finger to the wolf’s lips and leaned in. His smile was still there but it had lost the smug veneer that set so many other animals’ teeth on edge, and his voice went low and conspiratorial.

“Riz says hello.” He winked. “You should visit him one of these days.”

Then he stepped away and vanished from the room like a puff of cloud, leaving Legosi slack-jawed.

The world outside these walls continued its slow and painful reconfiguration as everyone came to grips with the aftermath of the Butchers' last delivery. In the rooms besides Legosi's, many other animals tossed and shivered in their own drugged sleep, bodies marked by the bombs or by other citizens maddened by paranoia or appetite. But none of them had as many visitors, or such variety in their procession, and the nursing staff's reaction at yet another animal asking for this lanky gray wolf eventually turned from irritation to anticipation; they became eager to see what latest character had been caught in Legosi's orbit. For his part, Legosi still couldn't quite understand where they had all come from. Had he really connected with so many, so deeply, after years spent encased inside his own head? Where had he found the time?

Every night, when his room went empty, he stoically endured the burn and itch and sting of his wounds until sleep could pull him down again. He stared out his window at the haze of light pollution above, waiting for the stars to come out. He wanted to view them clearly. He still felt the pull of them, of things left unseen and unsaid.

* * *

The rainy season finally started to ebb, and brought in a dryer, sharper chill as autumn began in earnest. Haru sat on the wide steps of her university's library, wearing a gunmetal-and-black plaid flannel that wasn't nearly heavy enough to keep her warm, but the sun soaking into the fabric helped a little. The stick of an aloe lollipop rotated slowly around her mouth as she waited. She'd went through at least half a dozen of these things a day lately in a feeble attempt to distract herself from the stress; she'd considered skipping the half-measures and just taking up smoking, but that would have ruined her sense of smell, which was no good for an aspiring florist.

She'd been thinking of the future a lot lately.

It was mid-afternoon on a weekend and midterms were still distant enough for most of the students to safely ignore, so the campus was relatively sparse. She had a clear view of the two approaching animals, and even if she didn't, those antlers would be a dead giveaway. She waved. Juno waved. Louis could not wave, because one hand was holding his cane and the other arm was firmly interlocked with Juno's. Despite all the time and distance that Haru and Louis had put between their relationship, she was surprised at how okay she felt seeing that.

"So this is your college," said Louis, by way of an introduction. "It's rather nice."

"Glad you approve. Want to take a load off?"

He eased himself onto the steps and set down his cane, with Juno sitting beside him. He'd been fitted with new prosthetics before being discharged and his body had regained the appearance of being whole, but his stitches had also come out and his scar was now a pale jagged slashmark bisecting his face. Haru bet that it drew attention, but Louis seemed comfortable enough with it.

“You’re feeling okay?” Haru asked. “No permanent damage?”

“Nothing other than the obvious,” he said, tapping the scar. “For all the other difficulties I endured down there, I didn’t put too much strain on my leg. Hopefully I won’t need this cane much longer.”

“I already told him about Legosi,” said Juno. “When’s the last time you saw him, Haru?”

“Last week.” They’d said very little – she had just exchanged pleasantries with him and then sat beside him for an hour or so, clasping hands and filling the room with their mixed scent. “He still looks like a mummy but he’s not on death’s door anymore.”

“Hopefully he won’t suffer a coronary when we drop by, in that case.” Louis stretched and yawned; he looked more relaxed than Haru had ever seen him. “Wasn’t sure when I was going to be released, so this is all a bit improvisational. Plus there was the matter of my father to contend with.”

“You told him about you and Juno?”

“Not yet,” Juno said. “I have no idea what’s going to happen, honestly. His fiancée already threw me for a loop. Louis, you never told me how things went with your dad when you got home.”

“It was a little odd. I thought he’d remark on the scar at least, but he just hugged me and then returned to his study.” He shook his head. “I’ll never understand him.”

Juno and Haru exchanged a glance. Haru rolled her eyes and pinched the lollipop stick in an exasperated sort of way.

“I think he’s a lot less complicated than you’re making him out to be,” Juno said.

“That might be so. But he never held me like that before. At least not that I can recall.”

“Not big on public displays of affection?” Haru said.

“Not in the least.” His expression turned thoughtful. “I’ll need to develop more experience with them, myself. Juno, could you look over here?”

She turned to him, her expression quizzical, and his fingers gently took her snout and guided it towards his own. For a moment she resisted out of sheer surprise, then she melted into his touch and kissed him back. Haru pointedly averted her eyes and concentrated on her candy until the noises beside her had stopped, and then looked back to see Juno break away, panting a little, her tail going like a helicopter blade.

“Was that all right?” Louis asked.

Juno swallowed hard and brushed her cheek-fur back into shape. “It wasn’t bad.”

“You really have changed, Louis,” said Haru.

“I suppose that depends on who you ask. During my last conversation with Legosi, I told him that I wanted to be more open with my feelings. Do you know what he said to me?” Louis mimed putting a phone to his ear, all his limbs drawn in close and his chin tucked between his collarbones, and his voice dropped to a doleful murmur. *“That’s who you’ve always been. It’s what I admired about you.”*

“Please never do that again,” said Juno, after a long pause. The voice had been a pitch-perfect recreation of Legosi’s.

“You have to admit that it sounds like him,” said Haru.

Louis preened a little. “Glad to know that my acting skills haven’t fully atrophied yet.”

“I didn’t just mean it like that. It’s the kind of thing he would say.” She pulled the lollipop out of her mouth, the candy shrunk to the size of a raindrop. “He always sees the best in everyone but himself.”

That cast a pall over them. Juno’s and Louis’ ears drooped and Louis eyed the far distance, his face gone solemn. He picked his cane back up, kneaded it between his hands.

“It’s not surprising,” he said. “Before I came to know him better, I was always infuriated by how nervous he was to show off his strength to anyone, but now it looks like that was just a symptom of a deeper condition. I should have seen it earlier. He spent all his time in the dark, shining lights on the rest of us. It’s about time we returned the favor.”

He planted his cane on the ground and pushed himself up, and then offered his hand to Juno. She in turn offered hers to Haru, but she waved it off, then replaced the lollipop and grabbed the rail and stood.

“Let’s go see him,” said Juno.

With determination, Haru crunched the last of the candy between her teeth. “Let’s.”

* * *

Gosha pushed aside the blinds and kept his gaze on the window as he talked. Dusk was falling, everything gone to bruise. This room’s chair was on the other side of the bed, but despite Legosi’s insistence that he sit down he’d kept over here during his visits. Staying in the sun was a reptile thing, he explained, and didn’t add that it was still difficult for him to see his grandson like this.

This was the third time he’d stopped by, including the one when Legosi had still been unconscious. He’d expected the staff to get sick of him by now but to his confusion they’d been friendlier every time – or at least he’d been confused until they had spoken to him about Legosi himself. Their faces had lit up in the same way that he’d seen those udon-shop waitresses look when he’d stopped in the night of the Butchers’ attempted raid on the place, and overheard them gossiping about when he might come back. He forced a little joy into their lives. Thinking about it now almost got Gosha sniffing again, but he hardened up.

“Any news?” Legosi asked. His injuries continued to knit, his broken arm still in a cast but out of his sling. It would still be at least a couple more weeks before he would be considered well enough to leave.

“It’s getting wild but in a boring way, if that makes sense,” Gosha said, still looking out the window. “Awful lot of noise about the devourings and assaults that went down that night. Plus, the police and City Hall are having to answer some hard questions about why it was so important to save the black market. A bunch of carnivores I know from work were freaking out a bit just at the prospect of losing the place, and the large-scale herbivores were wondering what might’ve happened to them without somewhere for everyone to buy meat. It’s got everyone thinking about things they’d otherwise taken for granted.” His tongue flicked, withdrew. “It’d sure be ironic if that attack ended with all of us understanding each other a little better.”

“Do you think that’ll happen?”

“Well...it doesn’t hurt to hope. And Yafya’s going to do what he can.”

Yafya had been one of the few acquaintances of Legosi that hadn’t checked up on him, and Gosha figured that was unlikely to change – in some ways the horse was a little bit reptilian himself, shying away from public attention whenever possible, and his preparations for retirement followed in that vein. Apparently, he was setting up some kind of philanthropic organization intended to help the bombing victims and their kin. It was plain to see what he was actually doing, picking over what was left of the society he’d wanted to create to find something salvageable in it, and Gosha imagined it was likely that he’d be continuing this search for the rest of his life. He hoped Yafya would stay in touch, not disappear wholly into his penance. They all had to find how to live with themselves in the days to come.

“Nurse says it’ll be awhile yet before you’re all healed up,” Gosha said. “They might let you go a little earlier, though, depending on how much they need the bed.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re not going to want fur grafts, or anything? They might help.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” He looked down at the gauze still constricting his torso. “Mostly I just want to go home.”

Gosha approached his bedside. “Given any thought yet as to what comes after that?”

“Sunaga says I can still have my job back if I want it. But I’d like to do something with insects, someday. Not raising them for food or anything. Just taking care of them. No one thinks of them that much but someone out there has to.” He raised his hand in front of his face and rotated it slowly, remembering the way Kabu would crawl around his fingers. “Haru’s going to open a flower shop or a greenhouse eventually. Maybe I can do something with her. Bugs help plants grow, after all.”

Gosha smiled. “That sounds like a fine idea.”

“And I want you and me to start having dinner together. At least once a week. Don’t worry about paying.”

The smile vanished. “You-”

“Sunaga says you’re welcome at the restaurant but I wouldn’t mind your cooking either,” he continued relentlessly. “I haven’t even seen where you live yet.”

“I-”

“I still haven’t learned to cook myself, but Haru’s family is really good at it. You could visit them with me.”

“Legosi, that’s very kind of you, but I’m not sure it’s the best-”

“I mean it.” He transfixed Gosha with his stare. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about things. What I’ve regretted doing. Pushing you away was one of them. I shouldn’t have blamed you for what happened to Mom. I wanted to tell you that for a while but I could never figure out what to say.” He looked down to his clasped hands. “But I understand it a little better now. How easy it is to force yourself to be lonely, even if it just hurts you in the end. I don’t want you to do that to yourself anymore, Grandpa.”

Gosha didn’t say anything this time. Legosi peered quizzically back up at him; he’d gone still, mouth hanging open just enough to show a flash of fang. Legosi pushed himself up in his bed, about to ask him what was wrong, but then he followed Gosha’s gaze and froze up too. There in the doorway was Haru, Louis, and Juno.

“Hi,” said Haru. Juno waved timidly.

Gosha snapped his mouth shut. “I. Ah. Yes! Hello. Hello to...all of you. Sorry, didn’t know I’d been here that long.” He stepped smartly around the bed and made for the exit. “I’ll just be on my way, didn’t mean to interrupt...”

But he was stopped by Louis, who pushed out from the group and shook Gosha’s hand. Herbivore or not, he had the handshake strength of a seasoned professional, and Gosha probably couldn’t break it without flinging him across the room.

“You’re Legosi’s grandfather, I presume. Louis the red deer. We spoke on the phone earlier.”

“That was you?” He cast a frantic look back at Legosi, who didn’t appear ready to offer any escape routes. “Well then. It’s a pleasure. Er, the name is Gosha. Thank you for looking after my grandson.”

“It was a privilege, I assure you.” He finally let Gosha break free and leaned around him. “Hello again, Legosi.”

“Louis.” The words came out syrupy, like in a dream. “Your face...”

“Striking, isn’t it? Should liven up some stuffy board meetings in the future.” His cane clacked as he approached Legosi’s bed. “I’m fine. Sorry it took me so long to get here.”

Legosi's nostrils flared. He sniffed a couple times in Louis' direction and his eyes went wide. His head swiveled from Louis, to Juno, and Juno shrugged and smiled, and then Legosi grinned back, wide enough to show his teeth.

"I'm so happy for you," he said.

"I expected you to pick it up last time I stopped in here," said Juno. "Guess the room was too crowded. But yes, we're going to try to make it work."

Louis took her arm. "That about sums it up. We only get one life. Might as well be daring with it."

Throughout all this, Gosha and Haru had been eyeing each other up, both stiff as though they were a couple of basilisks. Haru broke first; she clasped her hands at her waist and bowed, ears bobbing.

"I'm Haru. Legosi's girlfriend," she said. "It's very nice to meet you."

"No, no, the pleasure's all mine!" He returned the bow like his spine was on a hinge. "You've made my grandson...I mean, I hope the two of you are very happy together!"

"We didn't mean to burst in on you like this. We just kind of stormed the place and when the nurse said there was another visitor..."

"It's no trouble at all!" He bent even lower, almost shouting now; even his scales looked to have darkened by a few shades. "I'm glad to see that he has such good friends!"

"Grandpa, please," Legosi said worriedly. "You're going to hurt your back."

If any of them were the least bit surprised at this sudden reveal of Legosi's heritage, they didn't show it, though Juno was giving Gosha a sort of distant look that Legosi couldn't identify. Haru straightened up and padded past Louis to the bed, cradled the side of Legosi's face.

"You're looking better already," she said.

"I feel better too. It still hurts, but at least I'm more awake. If that makes sense."

"Not for much longer, I bet," said Juno, regarding the window. "It's getting dark."

"Yes, we got here just in time." Louis turned to Gosha. "Sir, would you like me to give you a ride home? Or anything else, really? I owe you a great deal for everything you've done for him. For us both."

Gosha grinned nervously, kneading his hands with that unpleasant glass-on-glass noise.

"Don't inconvenience yourselves, please. I'll just get a cab."

"Excuse me, everyone," Legosi said. "Could we go up to the roof?"

Silence fell. Their faces all went blank as their brains attempted to process what their ears had just heard, and were promptly forced to reboot. When they did, Louis' sigh was long and loud.

"That didn't take long," Louis said. "I'd almost started to miss it."

"Legosi, when's the last time you even walked?" asked Juno. "The nurses will pitch a fit if they see you out of bed anyway."

"I know. But there's something I've wanted to see for a while. And I'd like to do it with all of you." He prodded his fingers together. "I know it's selfish, but..."

Haru said, "I'll go."

Louis' ear flicked; he recognized that tone. She was a lost cause. "Gosha, sir, I'm sorry to impose, but you'll have to be the voice of reason here."

"You don't have to call me sir," said Gosha. "And I trust him with you all."

Louis cast a pleading gaze heavenward. "Of course you do."

"You won't come with us?" said Legosi.

"I can stall for time if anyone shows up. Can't stop you from getting in trouble after, though. They'll probably chain you to the damn bed after this." His tongue poked out as he regarded them all. "He actually ran away from the hospital last time he ended up in here."

"Of course he did," Louis groaned.

"I think we can avoid being seen if we take the stairs. They're not far," said Juno. "Just got to hope that nothing's locked. Legosi, I'll help you up. Watch the cast. Louis, will your leg be okay?"

"I can handle a few stairs. And if anyone accosts us then I'll just be aggressively wealthy at them until they stop." He went to the doorway, peeked down the hall. "I'll admit, he has me curious as to what this is all about."

Juno carefully guided Legosi over the bedrail and to the floor. His knees shook and buckled at his body's sudden weight, and the movement made his bandages and the gashes underneath crease in unpleasant ways, but he steadied himself, Haru keeping a comforting hand on the small of his back. He'd lost weight; his hospital-issued trousers were cinched tight around his bony waist. Gosha unzipped his windbreaker and offered it to Legosi.

"Take it," he said. "You'll catch a chill."

Legosi obliged. "Thanks, Grandpa."

"Well, just make sure this cold-blooded old male gets it back. I'll need it for the trip home." He looked down to Haru. "He thinks the world of you. In case there was any doubt."

“There wasn’t,” she said. “Thank you so much for taking care of him.”

“Likewise.” He bowed one last time – brief and shallow, but no less grateful.

They moved quickly. Legosi towered over all of them and still walked like someone with his legs on backward, so they were highly conspicuous as they pattered down the bright-lit hall. Louis headed up the group, taking on his regal stiff-backed stride that made him look unstoppable as an oncoming glacier, and when he passed the stairwell door he shouldered it open and motioned for them all to get in. They looked up at the spiral of stairs. It was only a few flights, but from where she stood, Haru could see Legosi’s knees buckle again just at the thought of climbing them.

“It’s okay,” she said. “We’ll go slow.”

“The same goes for you, Louis,” said Juno.

“Like I said, climbing up a few stairs won’t trouble me. Going back down, on the other hand...that might be a problem.”

“I could carry you if you want.”

Louis considered the idea. “Tempting. We’ll see.”

No one else appeared as they ascended the steps, two by two, Haru holding Legosi’s pointer and middle fingers, Louis and Juno locking arms. The windows at each flight showed how night had fallen, purple deepening to black; Legosi stopped and craned his head up at the first one, trying to glimpse something, but he shook his head and let Haru return to guiding him on. He leaned against the rail to rest and that when Juno cleared her throat.

“Legosi,” she said. “About your grandfather...”

“He’s a Komodo dragon. Yes.”

“I was actually going to say that he’s a perfect sweetheart and I’m kind of mad you never mentioned him before,” she said. “Seriously, you were hiding *that* from us?”

“More likely he was hiding himself,” said Louis. “Does that sound about right, Legosi?”

“It’s a little of both,” he muttered.

“We already knew everything. Dr. Gouhin informed Haru and then she passed it along to me and Juno. It explains a lot. But at the same time, it changes very little. Least of all how the rest of us see you.” He adjusted the grip on his cane. “I can’t tell you how to feel about yourself, but take it from me, being ashamed of what you are is a thankless chore.”

“Sorry I let your secret out like that,” said Haru. “I got pretty emotional when I spoke to Juno after seeing you here for the first time. Talked too much. But Juno’s right, he seems really nice. I’d like him to meet my family when he’s ready.”

“So would I,” said Legosi. “But Haru, listen. Hybrids can mutate. Without warning. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. If it gets bad enough...”

“Then you’ll still be Legosi. And I’m not about to give that up.” She squeezed his fingers as tight as she could. “Don’t you remember what I said? I’m never going to be scared around you.”

Their eyes met, and held. In the quiet stairwell, their quickening heartbeats were audible to all.

“It’s not much further,” said Legosi.

They reached the top landing and Louis once again took the lead. He pushed the door open and the frosty air outside rushed to meet them. They’d wound up in some maintenance area where patients clearly weren’t meant to go; the path was a cage of chainlink fencing and the electric-razor buzz of the generators in the distance could be felt in their teeth. Legosi set off down the path like he’d been magnetized somewhere, Haru still at his side, Louis and Juno trailing behind. The moon had just begun to wane, the least sliver of its roundness carved off.

It wasn’t long before they arrived in disused lounging area. Louis and Juno stopped and took in the sight, but Legosi kept going, his lean and bent shape stalking through the empty planters.

“I’ve known hospital roofs to be equipped with helipads, but not patio furniture,” said Louis. “The rain’s done a number on it.”

“This hospital’s meant for large canines,” said Juno. “Moon-gazing heals us. Or so they say. It must be nice up here, when the weather’s warmer.”

“Is that why Legosi wanted to come? He could have just said. The way he acts I thought it was something more ominous.” He noticed the amusement on Juno’s face and his ears swiveled in suspicion. “What is it?”

“I’ve never seen you fuss over someone like this. It’s really cute.”

He grumbled, scratching the base of an antler. “Somebody has to try and keep him grounded. You saw how quickly Haru agreed to this. And she has the nerve to say that I enable him.”

“Let’s be honest, we’re not much better.”

“Maybe. There’s times it feels like the two of us are competing to see who can be more reckless. Which can also be a good thing, when you think about...oh my God, what is he doing? *Legosi, what are you doing?!*”

He’d reached the far end of the gardens and climbed over the safety railing, one leg at a time, mindful of his cast. When he made it to the other side, he offered his hand to Haru and she clutched his forearm, and he lifted her easy as a bag of groceries. He set her down gently and went to the concrete lip of the building and sat down, his bare feet dangling over empty air. It was a cloudless night, and the technicolor light pollution of the city’s mad geometry below

smothered the stars, but they could still be seen like holes in a great black sheet, hiding a more profound light underneath. Haru touched his shoulder, their eyes met, and he nodded and let her clamber around him, nestling into his lap. He locked his arm around her and bent low. He felt her heartbeat in the palm of his hand.

“How did you know about this place?” she asked.

“I’ve been here before.”

She nodded, as if that answered everything. “Do you remember the Meteor Festival?”

It had been twilight then, and on the other end of the city, where its lights were reflected on the sea like the rainbow film on gasoline. The abstract angles of the cable bridge. The wooden bench bearing carved remembrances of past lovers. The breeze had picked up when he’d confessed to Haru, and whenever he recalled that moment it came with the odor of saltwater.

“You said that you’d get stronger,” said Haru. “Are you strong enough yet?”

For a moment she thought an answer wouldn’t come. Then Legosi bent low and kissed the top of her head.

“I’m sorry you had to wait so long,” he said.

She nuzzled her cheek against his arm. “No more apologies.”

Behind them, Louis had just reached the rail. He spent several seconds trying to work out how to successfully navigate his cane and fake leg over it and then yelped as Juno swept him up in her arms and climbed over. She set him down and he dusted himself off, and smiled in spite of himself and offered his hand. They sat down beside Legosi, with Louis between the two wolves.

“You almost gave me a heart attack, you dumb dog.” He looked out at the city, the velvety skies, the distant hulk of the mountains like sculpted midnight. “But it’s a fine view.”

“Very romantic,” said Juno, lacing her fingers with Louis’. “We couldn’t see the stars this clearly at Cherryton. I wouldn’t mind going to the countryside someday. They’re so much brighter there.”

“That could easily be arranged,” said Louis.

Legosi looked skyward, ears pinned back. “I wanted to watch them leave.”

“What, the stars?” said Louis. “They won’t be disappearing anytime soon.”

Haru held onto Legosi’s arm. “Where are they going?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t follow them.”

These words and their implications sank in, and they looked up at the stars again as if noticing them for the first time. Legosi's eyes filmed with tears but his tail still bushed the pavement, wagging slow. Louis reached over and rested his other hand on an unblemished part of the wolf's back, studying the constellations as if he would find familiar faces, familiar scars.

"Can they see us?" he asked.

Juno leaned into him, spoke with quiet reverence. "I think they must have decided they'd seen enough."

"I couldn't go," said Legosi. "Not so soon. I'd only just learned how wonderful it all is. Everything, above and below." He smiled through his tears. "I love you all."

This moment wouldn't last. Before long, strangers would arrive to usher them back down to the world that uneasily carried on beneath their feet – where the newly dead were still counted, where those with fangs and those without continued to eye each other with cautious paranoia, where animals were wracked by wicked appetites and taboo affections and struggled to discern which was which. But for now they stayed there, sharing each other's warmth, as the overripe moon drifted through these pinprick lights which seemed to glow and brighten as if resonating with some other light within them. They waited for tomorrow and all it would bring. The fresh agonies. The stubborn beauty.

Chapter End Notes

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